

*ILLYRIA REBORN*

BOOKS BY  
DYMPHNA CUSACK

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# Illyria Reborn

DYMPHNA CUSACK



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## I

A DREAM come true at last, I said to myself as the plane took off from the Budapest aerodrome into the driving sleet. Here I was flying southward to that romantic land which had haunted me ever since my schooldays when I asked on my first entrance as Viola in *Twelfth Night*,

'What country, friends, is this?'

and the answer came,

'This is Illyria, lady.'

Far off in that Australian country town the word glowed in my mind along with Samarkand and Rome, Isphahan and Peking, all seemingly unattainable as dreams. And now with Rome and Peking and Samarkand already in my world of reality another dream was to be realized.

To get so far I had flown across a Siberia blanketed in snow and ice; to an England muffled in fog; back to a snowy Paris; southward over Europe, an abstract painting in white and black and grey. And now below me on a bitter morning stretched a vast snow-covered plain with wind-driven patterns, cobalt blue shadows, and the Danube looping across it like a ribbon of steel.

I lost myself in a dream. All my life I had read everything I could find about Illyria, a land whose history goes back into the mists of time, on whose soil all the ancient civilizations of the Mediterranean have left indelible traces, of whose past so much is written; of whose present so little is known.

'One hour and we are in Albania,' my travelling companion, a young engineer returning from the University in Warsaw, told me in a mixture of Italian and a lingua franca we had invented to fill our linguistic gaps. On the map he traced with a loving forefinger the outline of his tiny homeland embedded like a jewel in the matrix of the Balkans: Jugoslavia closing round it in the north and east, Greece on the south-east and south, on the west an improbably blue Adriatic with the heel of Italy less than fifty miles away at its closest.

Albania! That jolted me out of my Illyrian sentimentalities. What did I know of Albania except that the tourist office had guaranteed that there would be sunshine?

I raked out the booklet I had bought in Rome ten years earlier. It was then that I had first been bitten with the idea of going in search of Illyria after meeting in Amalfi a man who told me that he belonged to the Arberesh, an Albanian minority in Calabria which had fled before the Turks in the fifteenth century and retained its language, customs and costumes throughout six centuries of exile!

Such passionate long-lasting patriotism intensified the earlier spell Illyria had cast on me. I went in search of a guide-book to Illyria-Albania.

Noting that the dusty copy raked out from a dim corner of a Roman bookshop had been published in 1938 I asked: 'Have you nothing more recent?'

The bookseller dismissed Albania with one of those superbly cynical Roman gestures:

'Nobody goes there now!'

'Why not?'

'*Banditti!*' he rolled his eyes as he ran an expressive finger across his throat, cocked his finger and clicked it as if firing an imaginary pistol.

I was not intimidated. All over Europe and Asia I've been warned by the country I am *in* about the dangers of the country I am *going to*.

Two years in China and a trip back to Australia had prevented me from doing anything but skim through the opening chapter, which was not particularly encouraging. Neither was the reaction of the assistant in a London bookshop when I tried to buy an Albanian phrase-book. 'Albanian?' he said doubtfully, running his eye down a list of *Teach Yourselfs* from Afrikaans to Urdu. 'Are you sure there is an Albanian language?'

Encouraging or not, experiences in Russia and New China had cured me of taking any notice of anything but what I saw for myself. So here I was!

However, believing firmly that the more you know of a place before you visit it, the more you learn when you are there, I flipped through the guide book of 1938.

'Albania is the smallest country in Europe. . . . Albania is the most backward country in Europe. . . . The population is 95 per cent illiterate. . . . It has no industries. . . . Its agriculture is primitive. . . . Travel is difficult because of the state of the roads. . . . There are no railways. . . . Hygiene is poor . . . precautions should be taken with the drinking water. . . . The coastal areas are malaria-ridden. . . . Inns are verminous. . . . The traveller is advised to take with him everything he may be likely to require as there is no medical service and medicaments, toilet requisites, modern wearing apparel, etc, are unobtainable. . . . The country is two-thirds Moslem. . . . The sexes are strictly segregated. . . . The majority of Albanian women wear the yashmak and the traveller is warned against seeking any contact with them. . . . Albanian men are savage and suspicious. . . . The Vendetta is deeply-rooted in the Albanian community and murders are commonplace even in the city. The country is infested with bandits. . . .'

Slightly shaken, I closed the book and turned my eyes to the changing panorama.

Cubist mountains outlined in Indian ink against a sky the colour of forget-me-nots. A jet-plane trailing a silver ripple. Precipitous gorges, plunging rivers.

'*Alpi Balkani!*' said my engineer with mounting excitement.

'Montenegro,' announced a French-speaking Bulgarian across the aisle, adding, as glittering snowy peaks came up, '*La Chainé Dinarique*'.

As I looked down on the magnificent snow-clad sweep of razor-backed ridges, suddenly out of some chink of memory came their ancient name: 'The Illyrian Chain!'

Then the earth was lost in cloud and for a while we saw only the knife-edged peaks. My ears buzzed. We plunged through the billowing mist.

The engineer leaned across me pointing and calling joyously: '*La mia patria.*'

And there below was Illyria: the Adriatic a shimmering blue washing the indented green of the narrow coastal strip from which snow-crowned mountains rose majestically till it was impossible to distinguish peak from cloud.

My heart rose. Whatever else Illyria might prove to be, from the air it was as beautiful as any romantic traveller could desire.

The engineer pointed excitedly to rocky villages perched like eagles' eyries on the mountain side. One after another they slid away as we droned lower. 'Tirana,' he cried and the capital unfolded in its saucer of hills, its spreading outskirts gashed with new construction sites, a dark line cutting the green fields between it and the sea.

'The new railway line to Durres!'

My guide-book took its first knock.

We were already touching down. Out on the tarmac the sun poured down like a benediction. Flowering mimosas (my own Australian wattle imported to Europe a hundred years ago) joined with the innumerable eucalyptus to make me feel at home.

Two scholarly looking men greeted me in French and Italian. A smart young woman came to help me with passport

formalities. Amiable Customs officers waved my suitcases away. And then I was off in a modern car along the tree-lined streets of a typical Mediterranean town, with a minaret of exquisite delicacy rising against the snow-topped, lapis-lazuli rampart of Mount Dajti.

## II

WHEN I sauntered out of my comfortable bedroom on to the terrace of the Dajti Hotel, I said to myself: 'If one came to Tirana only to bask in the sunshine, drink in the crisp air and watch the ever-changing colours of Mount Dajti, one would be repaid.' The mind is refreshed and the heart takes solace from its sheltering splendour rising like a gigantic shield above the city, blue-black above the mist in the mornings when the sky above it is fiery with the unseen sun; amethyst, gold and rose in the late afternoon when it goes down into the sea.

Mountains enfold the capital on three sides, descending gradually on the south and west from the grandeur of Mount Dajti to the airy gap that marks the opening to the Adriatic twenty-five miles away.

If one wanted life without effort one could lie on the terrace in the sunshine while all day there wheeled and cried above it flocks of large, black birds with back and neck feathers a glistening pewter-grey.

If one were more energetic one might lean on the balustrade of streaked volcanic stone and watch the children playing in the grounds of what was once the Place of King Zog's lady-friends and is now the Pioneers' Palace where Tirana's children learn arts and crafts and 'volli-boll' and 'fut-boll' and 'basket-boll' and a variety of other sports.

But the city beckoned and I renounced my passive role and

went out with the Poet—one of the pair who had welcomed me at the airport.

He presented to me Spiro, the gay, good-looking young driver whose curly head might have served as a model for Apollo. Spiro bowed, hand on heart, as he said '*Mir dita*' (Good-day) and shook my hand.

The Poet pointed to the fine park opposite the hotel where roses bloomed in mid-winter and said in his lyrical Italian: 'That was made in a single night. The young people of Tirana worked from sunset to dawn and when we woke up, *Eccola!* Trees and flowers and shrubs—everything!'

Perhaps it was because my guide was a poet that Tirana came so vividly alive for me that day, or maybe the perfume of mimosa filling the air had something to do with it.

'Since you are interested in archaeology, I'm sorry to say Tirana is a relatively new city,' he began rather apologetically, as though it wasn't quite the right thing to offer to a visitor in search of Illyria a capital only three and a half centuries old. 'In 1614, Sulejman Pasha Mulleti, the largest feudal landowner, built a mosque, public baths and a bakehouse to attract the population and gradually the town grew.'

We drove slowly along the main boulevard with its tree-lined promenade in the centre and modern four-storey buildings rising on both sides, many of them new; caught glimpses up side streets of old, whitewashed Turkish-style houses with crazy-tiled roofs; gracious villas, green, rose or white. Everywhere flowers and newly-planted trees. Blocks of new brick flats, their rough brick surfaces a faded old-rose rather pleasing against the grey-green of the eucalyptus trees lining the streets.

'We will "face" them later,' said the Poet, 'but now the job is to house people properly. It's a great problem because the population has more than doubled and most of the old houses were sub-standard.'

'The Italians and beys between them built the many villas you have seen. But the old remained, overcrowded, dirty and

poverty-stricken and disease-ridden, evils that worsened during the war and that have taken us all the years since to cope with.'

\* \* \*

Here, I was to find, Yesterday and To-day are always close together. Everything reminds one, too, that here East and West met and mingled. Western clothes, baggy Turkish-type trousers (*prekushe*), voluminous pantaloons (*citjane*) tight to the ankle, worn by Musulman women of all ages topped usually by a black waistcoat, the whole surmounted by a triangular white veil of fine muslin drawn nun-like across the brow, one point hanging down the back, the others loosely crossed in front.

Others wear a black *chachaf*, a black shawl worn much the same way, its corners covering the ears and chin, sometimes even the mouth, and falling cape-like to the waist above a shapeless black skirt.

The Poet explained that not so long ago the skirt reached to the ankles and over the *chachaf* went the mask-like *perché* that hid the face entirely, as the *yashmak* does.

Life flows by, placid and unhurried in the clean streets. Housewives shopping; a kindergarten in short white smocks above long pants taking its morning walk, girl and boy hand in hand; a tall old man walking by with slow dignified steps, in jodphur-like homespun trousers, a long brown sheepskin cape swinging from his shoulders, a weathered *cheleshe* on his head, the Albanian *fez*-like, high white felt hat.

Two old women, their heads swathed in black, billowing black capes falling to their heels turned into the gateway of a Greek church.

From the minaret, the Muezzin called the Faithful to prayer while the Angelus pealed out from the Roman Catholic Church.

There was much to delight the romantic eye, particularly in the ancient market-place with its narrow cobbled streets lined with the tiny shops of artisans, 'soon to give way to a



House of Culture,'\* my Poet said proudly, showing me the plans of a fine building. In a way, I regret it, for here is a picture for which the maker of travelogues would give much, an island of life as it must have been for all the city's three and a half centuries.

We made our way through the tangle of alleys, the scene new and strange to me, the extraordinary variety of folk costumes rivalling the standardized tailored clothes of Western fashion, peasant women in richly embroidered costumes, some fresh and new, others very much the worse for wear; striped aprons in a harmony of vivid colours; baggy brown trousers; full skirts topped with embroidered jackets; embroidered veils of white and yellow; headkerchiefs; knitted stockings of an infinite variety of intricate designs—everything homespun, every pattern with its own significance.

The greater number of the sellers in the market are women, in itself a new thing. In the 'old' days (so close!) it would have been thought not only a shame, but a crime for a man to let his wife go to market.

They are as curious about my clothes as I am about theirs, and many eyes go to my slacks. Nowhere in the world have I seen women wearing such an astounding variety of pantaloons as I saw in the next six months—voluminous, stove-pipe, frilled and striped. Yet my very ordinary slacks always caused excited comment, obviously not all approving.

A handsome people, these. Haughty faces. High-prowed noses, flashing dark eyes, luxuriant black hair: an amalgam of ancient stock and countless invaders that time has subtly moulded into a distinctive racial type.

A high degree of artistry is shown in the hand-knitted socks with traditional complicated patterns of purple and red and yellow and black, the woven brez men wind around their waists like a cummerbund. Cheleashes in every degree of newness and oldness, some encircled with red scarves, others with yellow.

\* Now, 1965, nearing completion.

Embroidered waistcoats above white felt chideke—the tight Balkan-type trousers that suspend themselves miraculously from the hip and cling like a second skin to thigh and calf. Braided in black there is nothing more picturesque particularly when topped with a cape-type coatee with woollen pompons on the shoulders and a long fringe swinging with every movement.

‘There is a legend that long ago that cape was worn in colours,’ my Poet said, ‘but after the death of our national hero, Skanderbeg, it was changed to black in sign of mourning and it has been black ever since.’

Village-made, pointed, upturned opingas (the peasant footwear of the Balkans) step side by side with factory-made shoes.

I had a feeling that Yesterday was very close, a feeling that deepened as we entered a low dark shop selling ancient costumes richly and beautifully embroidered in gold and silver, their designs quite different from the peasant costumes.

‘They were once worn by the beys and pashas and their wives. Before the peasants could not afford anything so beautiful, to-day they wear them on festive occasions.’

I was only half-attentive; I wanted only to look and to listen.

Incessant, deep-tone chatter. Somewhere a radio playing a tune in an Eastern mode: the Poet hummed a few bars. ‘A Tirana wedding song.’ The quacking of ducks, the gobble of turkeys, the braying of donkeys, the clop-clop of wooden sandals. The tinkle of a stringed instrument they call the cheftele. Chickens to sell, eggs to sell, fodder to sell.

In shops men carving long wooden pipes and cigarette holders and colouring them dexterously.

A forge where a smith beats out on a primitive anvil an axe of the shape that was found in Illyrian tombs.

Gaily dressed gipsies peddling home-made tinware. A maker of cheleshes and pantoufles (white felt slippers) working the soapy wool on a sloping table whose ribs have been worn bare, taking pinch after pinch of wool and felting it into the soapy mass.

Shops with foodstuffs I have not seen elsewhere. Sellers of llokum (that in my childhood we called Turkish Delight), the most delicious I have ever tasted. Halva one eats with a spoon from a minute saucer. Coffee shops where café turq—black, thick, syrupy—is drunk in tiny cups.

The smell of baking; trays of large brown loaves withdrawn from deep brick ovens.

An old woman in a black citjane, a large dish of corn bread balanced on her head, wrapped in a white veil from which looks out a weathered face with sunken tragic eyes.

Homespun carpets sway in the breeze, royal blue and crimson and an exciting green, their traditional designs older even than the city. (One finds them also in Bulgaria and Roumania.) Shops with cheese and kos (the Albanian yoghourt); black olives and green olives (they have no equal anywhere in the world); piles of red pimentos; oranges and lemons from the Albanian Riviera.

The new food market across the square is conducted with full regard for the science of hygiene and is consequently more frequented but less picturesque!

In the Street of The Goldsmiths the craftsmen turn out exquisite silver filigree work of a great variety of designs. Witness to the old world so short a time away was an antique shop with a display of superbly engraved guns and pistols.

A photographer with a waiting queue and, on his list of samples, a picturesquely caparisoned male with a gun in his hand, and a miniature arsenal of outsize pistols in his brez. To what period did such an anachronism belong?

The Poet shrugged: 'Zogu's time. The Vendetta raged, the gun was always at the ready. Only twenty years ago in this market two of his followers fought and two innocent people were killed.'

At the near-by crossroads a smart traffic-policeman in navy blue piped with red, a long coat reaching his high boots, regulated the traffic: two multi-coloured motor cars in addition

to ours, an Albtourist bus, a barouche rather the worse for wear, a spanking new ten-ton lorry and a long low wooden cart its wheels not more than a foot high, drawn by a horse and a mule, each with a natty oilskin bag tucked under his tail.

We idled along the wide main boulevard to where it widened into a large oval surrounded by modern buildings, a sunken garden in the centre whose trees and shrubs were dotted with cotton wool.

'We have no snow here for the New Year so we make it,' the Poet commented.

On the seats old women knitted while babies sun-baked in up-to-date prams and old men smoked long wooden pipes.

'This is Skanderbeg Square. You know about our hero Skanderbeg,' the Poet stated rather than inquired, much as a Frenchman would speak of Napoleon. 'Think of it! For twenty-five years little Albania under Skanderberg held the Turks at bay!'

He made a gesture in which I saw the Ottoman hordes sweep over the country like a bush-fire.

'Then! Five centuries of Turkish Occupation. They ruined our country. They stamped out our culture, they smashed our monuments, they imposed the veil on our women, they tried to kill our language. They cut us off from Europe with which, up till then, we had marched in step. History gives us no record of invaders so brutal, barbarous and destructive, who gave so little as the Turks—until the Nazis came,' a statement I heard repeated through all the Balkan countries.

'It was not until 1912 that we were freed from their yoke.

'Towards the end of the nineteenth century a series of armed insurrections broke out. Garibaldi in 1866 announced his willingness to take part in the Albanian War of Liberation but it was not until a general uprising in 1912 that Albania was declared an independent State.'

He looked at me with a quizzical expression. 'You would know the rest?'

I nodded for him to continue.

He shrugged. 'Nationalism triumphed in the form of a democratic style of government in 1912. During the First World War we were overrun by the French on one side and the Austro-Hungarian and Bulgarian armies on the other. During the Turkish occupation some of the big feudal landowners had collaborated with the Turks in return for grants and favours and the democratic government was overthrown in 1925 by the feudal beys led by Achmen Zogu, who established himself as king with the support of Mussolini. This threw the country back into its old, poverty-stricken, vendetta-ridden condition.

'Again we suffered in the Italian-Greek war of 1940-1941. The Italian Fascists took over our country, to be displaced by the Nazis who did here what they did in every country they occupied.

'Those were terrible but glorious days—seventy thousand badly-armed partisans, six thousand of them women, formed an unbreakable force that held down three German divisions; proud achievement for a little country with a population of only a million and a half.

'We liberated our country in 1944. Albania was truly free for the first time in five hundred years.'

He pointed upwards. '*Eccola!* Skanderbeg's banner!' A fan of scarlet flags framed a coat of arms which bore a black double-headed eagle, and beneath it in large letters:

'RROFTE REPUBLIKA POPULLORE E SHQIPERISE'

'Long live the People's Republic of Shqiperi.'

'Shqiperi is our name for our country. [The official guide-book, in French, says it is pronounced "Chtchiperie"!] It means land of the eagle, or some say, sons of the eagles. Our Socialist Republic was established in 1944 under the leadership of the Party of Labour—to give it the literal translation. It is only since then that we have begun to make any progress from

the state of backwardness, degradation, poverty and misery to which Turks and feudal beys and Italian fascists and Nazi armies had reduced us.

'Our living standard, which was the lowest in Europe, is still not high, but it improves each year. Our Hygiene Service has done away with the dirt and the disease. The dam that feeds the new hydro-electric brings us pure mountain water. See;' He pointed to the foothills of Dajti. 'There it is. Near it archaeologists discovered the ruins of the ancient fortress of the Illyrian tribe, the Albanons, from which it is thought the name of Albania was derived.'

Back in the car, Spiro coasted slowly and proudly past Tirana's modern glories.

'Our new University, our new Opera House, our new Medical School, our new pharmaceutical factory, our new glass factory, our new porcelain factory, our new textile factory,' the words rolled off the Poet's tongue like a poem.

'You must forgive me if I seem so proud of what to you is probably commonplace,' he said, detecting perhaps a glazed look in my eye. 'But to us they are wonderful because they are the *first*. In 1945 we had nothing. Absolutely *nothing*!'

\* \* \*

From the hilltop on which Zog's imposing Palace stands, surrounded by a wall that showed his little faith in his subjects, I looked over the city that had already begun to put its enchantment on me. Minarets floated in the brilliant light; cypresses stood like dark exclamation-marks against snow-capped mountains whose colour changes with the hour, and, as I was to find, in winter, spring and summer, are always beautiful.

\* \* \*

That night I threw my guide-book into the wastepaper basket.

### III

IN THE Museum of Archaeology and Ethnography at Tirana University I looked long at the painted figure of an Illyrian woman reconstructed as she was found in a tomb on the site of Albania's first great dam and hydro-electric station: earrings, bracelets, pendants; everything was there, even a fragment of the woven woollen material of which her dress was made and the buttons that adorned it.

Dr Animali, the Professor of Archaeology, said: 'Here are the utensils that she used in her household: pottery, bowls, knives.'

I tried to recreate this woman of three thousand years ago whom loving hands had so richly caparisoned for the tomb so that she might lack for nothing beyond. What was her name? In what language did she say her last farewells?

The Professor smiled. 'We know only that some qualities of the language itself seem to make clear that Illyrian belongs to a group of the Indo-European languages. Unfortunately we have few examples. Many distinguished European philologists have made profound studies on it and we hope that intensive study and exploration will help us to learn more of it. The modern Albanian language has many words which indisputably derive from the Illyro-Thracian language of which we find traces as far as Roumania.'

'Before Liberation no one in this country was interested in

Illyrian culture. Any research was done by foreigners. They thought that the Illyrians came into Albania from a great centre in Austria called the Halstadt Culture.

'It was believed that they came here in the seventh century B.C. bringing with them the culture of the Iron Age.

'But the excavations that Albanian archaeologists, assisted by Russians and Czechs, have made in many parts of the country in recent years convince us that the Illyrians were already here during the Bronze Age (i.e. in the second millennium before Christ) and composed one of the largest populations of Europe.

'As you can see from this map, the Illyrian tribes were spread not only throughout the whole of modern Albania but in what is now Epirus in Greece, and through the whole of Yugoslavia, as far as the Danube.

'There is ample evidence that they had an advanced culture. In archaeological excavations have been found seeds of different grains—chiefly wheat and barley—and of grapes, apples, vegetables, peas, etc. They used light wooden ploughs drawn by domestic animals. Other agricultural tools were the axe and scythe of bronze and iron.

'Archaeological material also shows that in this period they knew and raised all the domestic animals which we know to-day.

'As their lands were rich in minerals—iron, copper, lead, gold and silver—metallurgy began to develop. In later centuries they learned to smelt iron in furnaces with the help of a bellows.

'You are interested?' he queried.

'I'm in search of Illyria,' I said.

'You will be seeing our country?'

'Much of it, I hope.'

'You will not find Illyria, at least not the Illyria I think you seek. It was already dying of its wounds when it passed under the domination of Rome more than two thousand years ago.' He made a vague movement of his hands.



'Of ancient Illyria, the tribes of which ruled this land from beyond its present eastern and northern boundaries to Epirus in the south, with roads that led north, south and east, linking Rome with distant China through the Via Egnatia that ran to Constantinople and the Old Silk Road—of this Illyria you will find a thousand pieces, but they will be only the broken bones: the citadels, so well-built that even the Turks could not complete their destruction, and scattered stones that once were cities are everywhere. Almost every Albanian village and town has risen on Illyrian cities or settlements. Much is left of the old citadels. The strength of the great walls which encircled their centres has defied conquest and Time. There are ruins which have stood undisturbed through the centuries.'

'And what of Shqiperi, the Albania of today—how did it evolve?'

'It was a history much akin to the history of all the northern lands. The Greeks established colonies along our Adriatic territory as early as 2,500 years ago. The Byzantines and the Venetians followed much the same pattern. Not that it was all a peaceful process. The Romans and others came to conquer. And in conquering there is always death and destruction.'

He paused and gazed at me, his look an unspoken question: Did I agree? I nodded. His slight gesture expressed his satisfaction.

'I sometimes think that every marauding country in Europe marched over our land in addition to those that established their colonies and trading centres—and as if that were not enough, we had the great earthquakes of the fourth and thirteenth centuries to destroy the beauties with which the Greeks and Romans had adorned the cities they built.'

'So you see, we have a great past to unravel. We have learned much about it since 1945 but there is still much to discover.'

#### IV

THE ROAD from Tirana to the coast runs north-west to the gap which opens the way to the coast and the port of Durres, oldest city in Albania and one of the oldest in Europe.

As we approached, a line of hills running down to the sea emerged from a silvery mist. A château dominates the town which sprawls down the hillside and along the gulf and which is to-day Albania's most important port.

With our guide and interpreter, a trilingual teacher whom I have called the Professeur, we swept up the winding road to Zog's former château, a characterless modern building. But the view from its terrace is superb, the gulf stretching away to the south in a great sickle of white sand fringing the Adriatic. Below is a Greek church, with a belfry white among dark cypresses. A shepherd pastured his sheep on the slope below the cemetery; and to the right, in a steep gulley, soldiers in khaki uniforms and heavy top-coats were carrying out manoeuvres.

From there the low-lying area behind the city looked like a lake.

'Great efforts are being made to drain it,' the Inspector of Public Education, a friend of the Professeur, told me. 'Much of the ancient city is still buried there. If we haven't succeeded in uncovering it, at least our efforts have succeeded in eradicating the malaria with which the district was riddled. Actually,

three towns had been built here, one on top of the other, and to-day the new town covers them all.'

He paused and when he spoke again, once more it seemed a myriad ships—quinqueremes and galleys and galleons—rode on the placid waters: 'Records show that more than five thousand rope-makers worked for the ships that came into the Port. Evidently it was a very rich town, as indicated by the remains we have found in draining part of the lake, and in unexpected discoveries when excavating foundations for the new houses.

'It is certain that the Illyrian city which became a Greek colony in 627 B.C. had itself a high standard of culture.'

His eyes sparkled as he pointed south and east to the snow-covered mountains glistening in the sunshine in sharp contrast to the sparkling blue of the sea. 'If you don't mind a stiff climb, in the village of Dorez you can see still the ruins of the strong walls of the Illyrian fortress of Dorez, from which it seems probable that our city took its name. It was the strategic point from which the Illyrians waged their wars against the Colony of Epidamnus or Dyrrhachium, founded there by Greeks from Corfu (the Corcyra of antiquity).

'Under the name of Dyrrhachium it continued to be an important city when the whole of Illyria passed under Roman domination in 168 B.C. Roads linked it with the coastal cities of the south and north and extended right into the Balkans. The famous Via Egnatia linked it with Rome and Constantinople. There caravans brought the riches of China across the Old Silk Road and their silks passed this way to clothe the Roman Emperors. Only a few months ago we found a fine statue of a Roman emperor in a canal, it is thought to be the Emperor Augustus of the second century A.D.

'When the Roman Empire was divided in A.D. 395, the town fell into the hands of Constantinople and became the main doorway from the west for the Empire of Byzantium and, again, the main road from East to West. In 491, the

Emperor Athanasius, himself born in Durres, fortified the town with three very strong walls to protect it against the Ostrogoths.'

Down in the city we follow the ancient walls, pausing at a section over twenty feet high, part of the original walls of the fifth century. Behind it the spear of a minaret loses itself in a blossoming almond tree that springs from the crenellations.

To-day, and for how long back I don't know, little houses have been built on the wide top of the wall and—pleasant change from wars and destruction—washing flaps on a line where once four horsemen rode abreast.

Rosemary and thyme thrust from its crevices; tiny lizards sleep in the sun and forget-me-nots blow in the grass at its foot.

A garden has been made along the wall and children are playing among the weathered gravestones and broken columns oblivious that all history is around them. On a seat of worn marble that has once been the cornice of some noble gateway a worker in blue dungarees sits smoking, and I wander along, stopping to crumple a leaf from a slender gum-tree that splinters the light above a tombstone on which I can decipher only the word 'Mater'.

A Byzantine cross. Stone balls for catapults. Cannon used by the Venetians. Iron cannon-balls.

A museum for ancient weapons which the caretaker assures us is the fifth-century original watch-tower. A domed interior, in such good condition that obviously it has been restored in recent times. Six deeply embrasured rooms on each side in which stood the cannons with their iron balls.

We climb the difficult staircase at the top of which in 1940 the Italians had a concrete gun emplacement. From below rise the voices of children playing in the park.

\* \* \*

Under the Inspector's guidance Durres's millenia of history unrolled. The Bulgarians succeeded in taking it from the Byzantines for a short period. Coming from Europe the armies

of the First and Third Crusades landed there and in 1081 the Normans, led by Robert Guiscard, succeeded in beating the Byzantines.

It fell successively to the Hohenstaufens, the House of Anjou, the Serbs!

In 1392 the Venetians bought it and held it till 1501 when it was conquered by the Turks. With the Turks its power and grandeur disappeared altogether. Even the powerful citadel which had served in so many wars was reduced to a narrow enceinte.

Though weak and unimportant, its time of war wasn't over. In the eighteenth century the citadel was bombarded by the Spanish Fleet and by the Venetians. In the nineteenth century its walls were still in perfect condition but were destroyed by an earthquake in 1928.

In 1914 Durres became the capital of Albania in a *coup d'état* that makes musical-comedy Ruritania look a sober constitutional State. The German prince, Von Wied, established his residence and government there, to be chased out at the end of six months!

When the Italians came in 1927, they modernized the port, and built wharves. On 7 April 1939, it was here at Durres that the principal Italian troops landed on their way to fight the Greeks. During the war, thousands of 'Durrsakes' engaged in partisan fighting in the city as well as the surroundings.

In their retreat in 1944 the Germans blew up the quays. The port is new and what exists is only a fraction of the planned modern port that is emerging from the blueprint stage to actuality.

\* \* \*

Later in the Volga Hotel café I talked with some men from the docks, just come off shift. Hearty, robust men, with a dry sense of humour. They told me in a racy Italian how they had driven out the Nazi troops, rebuilt the docks where 12,000-

tonners can now tie-up. To-day they'd been unloading trucks and buses.

'Heavy work,' I commented. They shook their heads. '*Po si!*'

'We never had it so good!' a weather-beaten sailor in a greasy cap said. He spoke English with a mixture of Lancashire and Cockney, having been on an English ship during the war. He tapped the table for emphasis. 'Lady, if you knoo what it's like in other ports my ship goes to! Why, just over the way in Italy, the Bari dockers are lucky if they gets a shift a week, and when they protested they got the fire 'oses turned on 'em—and the snow a foot deep in the streets. D'ye know, loov, (I liked that!) a coupla years ago I seen 'em turn the bloody police on a lotta poor bastards in Barletta askin' for "*pane e lavoro*". Nothing but bread and *work*; and two poor devils that 'adn't 'ad a job fer more'n 'alf a year was shot. Shot I tell yer. One of 'em with seven kids and nothing ter feed 'em on.

'We took the 'at round fer the widder and one of the coves said: "Blimey, 'oo ever 'eard of an Albanian 'aving money to give away before?" And I said: "In Albania to-day, the sun rises for the whole world."'

\* \* \*

We ate our lunch on the terrace overlooking the sea in the large, modern hotel that has been built on the edge of the biggest beach on the Albanian coast. Everything was blue and silver. We drank our beer trying to place just where the Via Egnatia began, watching small boys in trousers full to the ankles playing hilariously on the beach.

Out in the bay three ships swung in the slight breeze, waiting their turn to take their place at the unloading cranes that made a futurist pattern against the azure sky.

'Many bones with leg-irons have been found in the sea,' the waiter told us. 'They have been found also in the fields in the villages around here. You can tell those of the galley-slaves from the land-slaves because the galley-slaves' legs were chained

very close together while those of the land-slaves had a chain wide enough apart to allow them to work at their fullest. *Shum kege! Shum kege!* (Very bad! Very bad!)

The small museum is not so much remarkable for its contents as for the fact that it gives fascinating glimpses of the culture that flourished on this very spot continuously for three millenia. Illyrian, Greek, Roman, Byzantine.

Illyrian ceramics, beads and rings and hairpins in bronze, and thimbles like the Chinese fingertips that they use even to-day. Illyrian weapons encrusted with rust. A string of gold beads. Perfume phials of glass clouded by the centuries. Egyptian? Phoenician?

Greek relics from the seventh century B.C. The bas-relief of a dog under a banqueting table—extraordinarily life-like. A terracotta profile from a Greek Temple. A vase of the sixth century found recently when a drain was being dug.

A spirited relief of a calf being led from a protesting mother.

On the wall is a quotation from Aristotle (fourth century B.C.) in which he describes the political set-up in Dyrrhachium and gives details of the elections of the magistrates.

That there was a sculptor's workshop close by is shown by a superb head of Zeus, unfinished, with the chisel marks still upon it. Fragments of architecture and sculpture, most of them quite unlike those found in other Hellenic centres.

In the near-by necropolis gravestones of the fourth century B.C. were found. A winged siren, eyes closed, a hand cupping her ear, singing a mourning song. Another broken gravestone with a man's head, his face full of sorrow, a woman's hand on his shoulder—all that is left of her—deeply moving, not only in the perfection of its shape but in the way in which it rests as though to join him in some mutual sorrow.

A small boy's cup buried with him. A tiny phial used for gathering the tears of the mourners, so that in the cold earth the dead might know that the living wept for them.

Lead plumbs with which ancient fishermen weighted their

lines. Small stone boxes which contained the ashes or the bones of the dead. Small pottery lamps. A lively little clay horse. A child's toy. The tools with which a carpenter worked over twenty centuries ago. A Byzantine jug so light that it is difficult to believe that it is made of clay.

And converse of these moving tributes of love and life, the bas-relief of a gladiator preparing to run his sword through the back of the vanquished. Iron cirelets enclosing the ankle-bones of slaves, encrusted with the rust of twenty centuries.

A roomful of finds not yet classified.

'People bring things in nearly every day,' the assistant said. 'We haven't enough time or experts to arrange them. Recently a very beautiful gold Greek bracelet of the third century B.C. was found.'

'Where is it?' I asked eagerly.

The assistant looked unhappy. 'I'm sorry. The Director is out on some excavations and he has locked it up.'

As we turned homewards, leaving the Adriatic behind us opalescent under the sunset, we met a group of workmen carrying carefully between them a grey oblong stone, water-soaked, earth-stained. We stopped to look at it.

'It's a tombstone—Greek,' said the youngest.

He picked at the mud encrusting the bas-relief. 'We found it when the earth-shifter was working on the site for the new flats. We're taking it to the Museum. We always do now.'

I touched the stone gently. Yesterday and To-morrow.



## V

I WAS to travel the greater part of Albania in search of Illyria. Not so impressive a journey in terms of distance, as the country is only 200 miles by 100 at its broadest, but it is two-thirds mountains with precipitous mountain roads.

One sparkling winter morning I set off with the Professeur, the picturesque landscape unrolling before me like a colour film : wooded slopes where the brown of dwarf oaks contrasted with the green of pines; houses of former beys, picturesquely set on hilltops among clustering trees outlined against a clear blue sky; on the lower land, whitewashed farm cottages, surrounded by pointed fodder stacks looking like giant toadstools; everything glistening after heavy downpours in the night, the rain-washed air giving a peculiar vividness to the fertile valleys. Everywhere on the hillsides the wind tossing the silvery foliage of olive trees.

Shepherds leaning on forked sticks watching their grazing sheep, black and brown and white and splotched.

In the field groups of women weeding, their snowy-white veils and their citjanes, red and blue and orange and black, a gorgeous frieze against the dark earth.

The tender vivid green of young wheat and maize. Tobacco and cotton seedlings sending up early shoots.

Along the road, a woman in a black citjane walked with a large magenta bundle on her head. A man and his wife strode beside a donkey on which were perched two tiny children, one

with a brilliant purple scarf around her head, the other with a green, their little legs sticking out above bunches of freshly-cut leeks.

At the crossroads waited an old peasant-cart drawn by two buffaloes, patiently swinging their broad heads while a great lorry bearing petrol from the oil-fields thundered by. A tractor bumped over a field drawing a plough that turned deep furrows in the chocolate soil. On the slope above it, a peasant followed two oxen drawing a wooden plough such as his Illyrian ancestors had used three thousand years ago. Overhead, the Cairo-Moscow Jet TU 104 roared in to land at Tirana airfield.

Old and new mingled, not only in traffic but in people.

A woman watched a few sheep, spinning as her ancestors did, a distaff in her right hand, the spindle whirling.

A smart young student went by leading a surveying team, including a girl. An endless string of peasants made their way to the weekly market.

A large modern truck slowed down to let pass a string of donkeys almost invisible underneath high-stacked loads of maize stalks from which emerged only their noses and daintily stepping feet, and the truck-driver shouted to men in *prekushe* and black-fringed waistcoats walking beside them.

By the roadside, a *teqe* (a type of small mosque) whose 'saint' had a reputation for performing miracles. It belonged to the *Bektashi*, a dissident Moslem sect driven out of Turkey in the eighteenth century because their ideas were too progressive for Orthodox Islam. Most of them degenerated into ignorance and superstition. Others continued to play a progressive role. Some of them fought in the Resistance.

\* \* \*

The minaret and clock tower of the citadel of Peze overlook the valley. Kullas dot the least accessible spots, looking more like fortresses than dwelling places.

The kulla is unique in modern Europe. Built in stone with

the roof of tiles or stone slabs it has no windows in the lower floor and only narrow slits in the upper, so placed as to prevent The Enemy shooting through them.

Till recent days it was indeed a fortress since, in Albania, for longer than history can tell, the Unwritten Law (the Kanun) enjoined the blood-feud as its instrument of justice. Following its rigid code a feud might wage backwards and forwards for years, even generations, each family in turn being murderer and victim, hunter and hunted. Each side thought of each other as The Enemy (*armik*). As late as 1938—so the Professeur told me—a man of Mirdita as he sat at table, was shot by his enemies who climbed up to put their rifles through the slits. Except in rich houses, and then only in upper floors, there was no glass in the windows, which had thick pieces of wood or stone slabs covering them at night.

Access to the upper floor (or floors, sometimes three) was usually by a fixed ladder that could be pulled up. Outside, nothing was wooden, except the door—sometimes covered with iron—to prevent The Enemy burning his victim out.

To-day the Vendetta is finished, but the kullas still stand, symbol of another day, as do spreading agglomerations clustered round a closed courtyard: homes of the patriarchal families which still exist, particularly in this region, both in sharp contrast to the houses built in recent years: single-storeyed with ordinary doors and wide windows, open to all.

We took the road to Kruje.

From the plain one sees the village perched like an 'eagle's nest' (as Barletinus, the Albanian historian, described it) against the lower bare escarpment of Kruje mountain rising thousands of feet above it. The lower slopes are silver-grey with olive groves, the upper rise sheer and barren to the mountain which is nearly as high as Dajti.

The road sweeps up the foothills, covered with sparse vegetation where sheep and goats graze, the bellwether and the bellbuck coming to the edge of the road to watch us go by.

The citadel of Kruje was already famous for its strategic position five centuries before it became the citadel from which Skanderbeg victoriously led the great Albanian struggle against the Turks in the fifteenth century. It is a story without which it is impossible to understand Albania's history, which was cut sharply in two by the Turkish conquest.

Kruje village seems to have grown out of the hills, with its houses of stone, its rocky roads and the ruins of the citadel dominating it all.

We walked slowly up the rough road to the citadel, past a little shop where an artisan was making opingas, past shopkeepers sunning themselves on their doorsteps, past women warming their hands at little charcoal braziers. A woman with a load of bread on her head, two baskets in her hand, bade us, '*Mir dita*'.

At the crossroads a kindergarten in white smocks met and greeted me with loud, chirping cries. Having shaken hands with the leading girl and boy, I had to shake hands all down the line.

Farther on, a wooden cradle on wooden rockers gaily decorated with painted flowers stood in the sunshine outside a house. With an appealing glance at the mother, I peeped sentimentally under the cover to see the sleeping child. Out of a baby face two black, eagle eyes stared at me, so wide, mature and full of indignation that I hastily dropped the cover and retreated with an apology.

\* \* \*

The whole of Kruje region thirty centuries ago was part of a large Illyrian settlement. Kruje means 'fountain', and half-way up to the citadel, the water bubbles from the cliff-side as it has bubbled for at least three thousand years. At its icicle-festooned basin three young brides in scarlet citjanes, dark eyes peeping at us curiously from under snowy scarves, filled two-handed pots of a design found in the Illyrian graves in the centre of the village.

I watched them go clopping up a stony track in wooden sandals, the heavy jars balanced gracefully on their shoulders.

We passed beneath the great arched stone entrance to the citadel whose existence was first recorded in the ninth century. Below the foothills descended metallic under olive groves, and the chocolate marshland stretched to a flat china-blue sea.

An old shepherd who was watching a flock of eleven sheep and two goats took his gaily-painted wooden pipe from his mouth to say '*Mir dita*' and politely inquire my country and business.

The Professeur told him that I was in search of Illyria.

Waving his pipe southward the shepherd said that not more than an hour on foot would bring me to the ruins of Albanopolis. Hard walking, but if I'm interested. . . .

I looked at the steep hills and the stony sheep tracks and decided against it.

'If there's anything you want to know about this part, ask me,' the old man smiled at me and shook his head. '*Po si!* ask me. I've watched my flock on these hills under the Turks, under Zogu and under the Italians and the Germans. *Po si!* I've seen many things happen here.'

He shook his head reflectively. The Albanian nod is a negative; our negative shake of the head for them means 'yes'! It can be very confusing for both sides.

He took up his story.

'Would you believe it, that when I was young this was Vendetta Country. There was one long and bitter feud where not even boy-children in their cradles could be taken out of the house for fear of their being killed by The Enemy. And see how peaceful it is now!'

He sucked on his pipe and we waited. This was my first contact with old Albania. He spat into the grass and went on:

'This was the centre for partisans on Kruje Mountain and in

the last battles nearly everything that still stood here in the citadel was destroyed.

'The Germans were worse than the Turks—even though we hated *them* so much that if we were boiled in the same tank our blood wouldn't mix. But the Germans tortured women as well as men. You want to talk to Caje Hima—she was runner for the Partisan Battalion. They caught her but couldn't make her talk. *Po si!* We learnt then that women can be brave. She was imprisoned in the concentration camp at Prishtina under the S.S. But still she never talked. Skanderbeg's blood still lives here.'

That led us to the epic story of Skanderbeg :

In contrast with the darkness that settled upon Albanian literature after the Turkish invasion, Barletinus left a well-documented account of the life of Skanderbeg.\* It is generally accepted that, at the age of eight, he, son of the chief of Kruje, was taken as a hostage to Constantinople. He served in the Ottoman Army and became so good a general that he received from the Sultan the title of bey—the 'beg' of his name is the North Albanian for bey. Then some memory of his own country, to which he had never returned, called him and he came back. While the Ottoman Empire was engaged in war with Hungary, by skill and guile he ousted the Turks from his family citadel and led the Albanians in that struggle of which all Europe wrote.

The pictures of Skanderbeg that exist were made by Germans or Italians and show the strong aquiline face typical of so many of his countrymen to-day. His sword, copies of which are in every Albanian museum (the original is in the museum of Vienna), indicates a man who must have been tall and immensely strong.

In a day when leaders consisted entirely of feudal princes, Skanderbeg selected his officers not only from among the tribal

\* Later I saw an impressive and moving film of Skanderbeg's life—a Soviet-Albanian co-production.

princes but from peasants who had distinguished themselves in warfare. Tradition attributes to him the phrase: 'I did not bring you liberty. I found it among you.'

The old shepherd ruminated over his painted pipe. 'It was only when he was sick and old, betrayed within and without, that he was defeated.

'In the terrible siege, after his death, it was hunger that forced the people of Kruje to yield, trusting in the word of the Turks who, however, hating Kruje and all it stood for, massacred everyone. They tried to wipe out the name of the village, too, and called it the White Citadel, but the name Kruje outlasted them as the name of Skanderbeg lived on.

'Have you heard the song we sing about him?'

I hadn't, and there on the sunlit plateau, he put aside his pipe and sang, or rather chanted, one of the many popular rhapsodies.

Like most Albanian folk songs it is very long and, as time was short, he apologized for singing only the last fifty or so verses!

He stood with a hand cupping his ear, looking away to the sea, his voice high and cracked.

I attempt only a rough translation of one part:

When Death came to tell Skanderbeg  
that he was going to die  
He began to think of the years to come.  
He saw his son, too young,  
too young and fatherless,  
and his country in mourning.  
He spoke to his son: 'Flower of my heart,  
take your mother and three galleys,  
the best you possess, and  
go quickly from here,  
for you will fall into the hands of the Turks.  
You, they will kill, your mother  
they will take captive.  
Before leaving the country, you will

come to the edge of the sea,  
There where there is a cypress, splendid  
and in mourning, tie up my horse.  
On the shore, in the sea winds, unfold  
my banner and to my banner attach my  
sword.

When the cruel wind of the north will blow  
my banner will fly and my sword  
shall sparkle.

The Turk seeing them, terrified,  
Thinking of the death which sleeps in my sword,  
Will not follow you in your flight.

The wild, strange chant, echoed through the ruined walls.  
History records that Skanderbeg's son and his wife Donika  
—to-day one of the most popular girl's names—reached Italy  
safely with the Albanian nobles who founded the colony of  
Arberesh. His descendants lived there till the end of the  
nineteenth century and there are those who say they fought  
under Garibaldi.

\* \* \*

Birds sang in the sunshine, sheep-bells tinkled. Somewhere  
in the valley the angelus was ringing. From the minaret of the  
village mosque, the hoxha began the mid-day call.



## VI

THOUGH I made many inquiries, nobody could tell me the origins of the Unwritten Law, but I learnt of its history from my friends—the Professeur and Ramadan from Kukes, both of them born and reared in the heart of the Vendetta country.

Five hundred years ago Lek Dukagjini, an older contemporary of Skanderbeg, established the capital of the northern tribes at Lesh, while Skanderbeg ruled the tribes from Kruja to Dibra.

Lek, like Skanderbeg, was law-maker as well as military man. A man of extraordinary power and personality, he convoked the mountain chiefs to 'parliament' at Lesh.

It is interesting that this 'parliament' resembled closely what one can learn of the methods of government of the ancient Illyrian tribes of 3,000 years ago.

After discussion, the laws evolved by the mountaineers over the centuries were codified. They were never set down on paper but handed on by word of mouth by the Tribal Elders, who administered but could not change the Kanun without a general assembly.

It regulated the hereditary communal grazing and water rights—in brief all the primitive economy of mountain communities where soil was poor and water scarce.

All households in the tribe or village had equal rights and could each graze as many animals, cut as much firewood or timber and build cattle-folds and shoot game, as they pleased, but they could not transfer any rights to strangers.

Interesting also to observe how far in advance of any European country of their period Lek and Skanderbeg were, since they proclaimed the doctrine that all men are equal before the Law. Women—as in every other country of the day—had no rights!

Lek fought on for twelve years after Skanderbeg died and surrendered only when the Turks promised to respect the Unwritten Law. Five hundred years of Turkish domination never succeeded in imposing their law on the mountaineers.

The Kanun said: 'Whoever joins the Government (i.e. Turkish) police shall have his house burned and be excluded from public gatherings and hospitality!' And for the Albanian—as I had found—hospitality is sacred.

It was a community law in every sense. Crimes against the tightly-organized social fabric were graver than individual crimes.

Each member of a household regarded everything in it as his own. His village was his personal property. Its honour his honour. The Kanun regulated the question of how he might vindicate a personal or a collective insult.

Though the tribes maintained Christianity in various forms against Mohammedanism, many of their customs were (and are) clearly of pagan origin, e.g. the custom of slipping a coin on the chest of the dead person obviously comes from Charon's obol.

The method of government by Elders at a General Assembly called a Kuvend lasted till the new regime in 1944. Indeed the Albanians called the assembly in 1943-44 as a national protest against German Occupation.

Watching these wild mountains that sweep back in intricate tumbled masses torn by chasms, ravaged by plunging torrents, it is easy to understand how the mountaineer maintained a law of his own in which family or tribe punished the wrongdoer.

The Kanun prescribed also the domestic organization of the patriarchal family, establishing 'bride-price' and punish-

ments for breach of the moral code. In short, it regulated everything from killing a sheep dog to killing a man !

'Whoever takes a woman to live with him without marrying her or runs off with a married woman or a girl shall pay 1,000 grosh to the Church, 500 to the Chiefs and 10 rams.'

An erring wife could be killed either by her husband or her father to whom she was sent back. But—unless the husband wanted a feud—he must kill her lover also and preferably the pair together.

I was told a grim story from before the First World War. The erring wife and her lover were taken to a grove where they stood together. The youth's uncle shot him, and girl's father shot her while the men danced to the beat of drums.

The Kanun fined a man who lamented his son's death. A mother would not weep publicly for her son. An ancient lament tells how Aicouna cries to her husband returning without their son :

'In the name of God, Mouy, what have you done with our son?' And Mouy replies :

'When you go to the forest to collect wood,  
Then you can weep for him,  
In the home, let there be no lamentations.  
For The Enemy has killed your child.'\*

They were stoics, these mountaineers and still are. I was told how a young partisan was wounded in a clash with the Nazis. Nothing to do but amputate both his legs. It was done in a peasant-hut without anaesthetic, the boy singing throughout, for to show pain would have been unmanly.

Going northward, Mount Dajti receded into a mist; the

\* Dr I. Elezi wrote in a report in 1964: 'Many foreign authors of the second half of the XIXth and of the beginning of our century wrote that 42 per cent of the deaths at Shkoder were caused by blood feuds. Since Liberation there has been only one death in that region caused by blood feud and that occurred in 1945'. In November 1964, it was officially stated that 'Blood feuds . . . turned hundreds of homes a year into deserted places. The average life span of Albanian men was not more than 38 years.'

great wall of Skanderbeg Range towers above the wide curves of the road which was built in 1915 by the Austro-Hungarians and now runs between fields where earth-shifting machines are gouging irrigation channels. Only recently a swampy hollow, to-day the plain is dotted with these machines and with bulldozers, picturesque gangs of canal-diggers—all busy with the job of draining it, and adding 7,000 acres to Albania's cultivable land—an achievement of enormous importance in a country that is two-thirds mountain and most of whose coastal plains were malarial marshlands.

The mountains purple, snowy tops against a sky of deep blue, Lombardy poplars bare and stately in the shimmering sunshine. The domes of Orthodox churches.

The busy main road which we traversed runs through Miloti crowded on market day with vehicles of all kinds from ox-carts to large motor trucks and innumerable donkeys.

We went into a little low-ceilinged café to have a *café turq*, reputed to be the best in Albania, and experienced the exclusiveness of the Albanian coffee-house, which is still considered as much a male sanctuary as an Australian hotel-bar. I was the only woman among the mixed bag of customers.

Coffee-making used to be sacred to men. It was, and is, a ritual. Not so long ago, the first cup of coffee made in a coffee-house was poured away to some mysterious saint as a libation, and men swore 'By the patron saint of coffee'.

The owner of the café presided over the fire with a solemn air while his wife unceasingly turned the long cylindrical brass coffee-mill. In a small fireplace above a wood fire stood a small, square tin boiler not more than eighteen inches by twelve which kept the water always hot. But the coffee was made in the individual small brass pots about three inches high one sees all through the East. The proprietor put a full tablespoon of coffee into it, a tablespoon of sugar, then scooped the hot water from the boiler, poured it in and pushed the small coffee pot into the coals.

While we waited I struck up a conversation with three men at the adjoining table. An up-to-date looking man in dungarees with a cap perched on the side of his head, told us that he worked in the State Construction Works in Tirana and his hawk-faced friend, Islam, a silent young fellow, was at a State enterprise elsewhere.

They offered me a cigarette and as I took it Baba (Grandfather), an old peasant in a khaki cotton-padded coat, a discoloured cheleshe perched rakishly on his grey thatch, shook his head and laughed. It was the first time in his life he had sat down at a table to drink coffee with a woman and one who smoked!

They were full of curiosity—where did I come from and when I said 'Australia', the old man stared. 'Australia!' he sighed. 'Ah! that's the place for good sheep! You're all rich there, aren't you?'

'By comparison with Albania, yes,' I agreed.

'Ah well,' he said, 'we're not too badly off here now. In the old days I could scarce make enough to keep body and soul together. I had a little bit of land, and I scraped it with an old wooden plough.' He made a gesture as though holding a plough in the furrow, and strained forward. 'You know,' he shook a horny forefinger at me, 'there were times in the old days when I scarcely had enough maize to last through the winter months, much less anything else. Now in the co-op all is different. You should see the machines they lend us from the Tractor Station—ploughs that'll turn the land that depth,'—he indicated a depth as improbable as the length of a fisherman's catch. 'Tractors to pull them; combine harvesters that come along at harvest time. My old father wouldn't have believed that such things existed. And indeed, twenty years ago, if you'd told me I'd see them in Albania, I wouldn't have believed it myself.'

I was to hear this from so many. The appallingly low standard of the past—still the lowest in Europe except rural Spain,

Portugal and Greece—with its maize-bread and leeks, has disappeared and each year sees a steady improvement in every way.

Baba was loquacious. 'Look at me!' he continued. 'In for market though all I came in for is to buy a bit of this and a bit of that—the wife wants all kinds of things nowadays.' He gave his gurgling chuckle. 'Things have gone to the women's heads, you know—always wanting this and that. Made everything herself once, even the calico in my shirt. Now she buys it.'

'Can't save any money, eh, Baba,' the young man laughed.

Baba slapped his thigh: 'What do we want to save money for? When I'm too old to work any more, there'll be a pension for me. We don't need to save money any more. There's a big change in the women these days, too, you can take my word for it. My old girls says to me: "Let's spend it; buy what we want now; when we're dead, the co-op will see that we get a decent funeral."

'There's changes in more ways than one. This used to be a centre of the Vendetta. Here the Malissores (mountaineers) came down from the mountain in wintertime to pasture the flock, taking them back in summer. The encounter of different tribes and enemy families was always fraught with danger. Practically no week went by without a shooting.'

'But why?' I asked. 'What were their reasons?'

He shrugged:

'A question of honour. Albanians are very touchy about their honour.'

I shook hands with them all, including the proprietor's wife, who had been listening with undisguised curiosity, so anxious not to miss a word that she'd even forgotten to turn the coffee-mill.

\* \* \*

Down to the market ground where an extraordinary variety of things was being bought and sold. Women in the costume of the region (it is Catholic), a long full white skirt above stove-

pipe white trousers, a handwoven apron, over it all a richly-embroidered sleeveless surcoat falling to mid-calf, with the black cross of the Returning Crusader on the back. They have a strangely nun-like appearance with their heads enfolded with a black veil, in their ears silver half-moon ear-rings that clearly descend from those I saw in the Museum which their Illyrian sisters wore 3,000 years ago.

A woman displayed a surcoat for sale. She had woven it in the winter from wool taken from their own sheep, spinning it herself while she watched them.

How many hours had gone into its making and how much did she want for it?

She was uncertain about the time it took to make . . . she picked it up when she had time . . . spinning it on her own distaff, weaving it on a loom at home. How much? Six thousand leks.

Six thousand leks! An average industrial wage for a month, so it's not by any means cheap. But before I reached the next stall another woman was trying it on.

I found I had a companion. Wherever I moved Lise was at my elbow. Soon her arm slipped through mine, looking up to me with large, lustrous eyes in the perfect oval of her face. She wore an ankle-length robe exactly like that worn by the older women, even to the fringed waistband, and her pretty little face was wrapped in a black veil. It seemed a solemn uniform for a ten-year-old.

In answer to my questions she said: 'I'm in fifth class, and next year I'll be in sixth, and when I finish the seven-year school, I'm going on to secondary school.'

She stuck out her pointed chin. 'Three of us are going. Papa said I can. Only last year Dije Sela, a girl from Fush-Kruse, ran away from home because her father wouldn't allow her to take up a scholarship she won to a school in Tirana.'

Baba was right. Women have changed!

We wandered arm in arm through the market. Food of all

kinds for sale. Many varieties of rice. More beans than I've seen anywhere at once. Beans are a particular feature of Albanian diet. Grain of all kinds; fodder for animals. Home-made wooden churns, wooden buckets, minute wooden stools, flat-sided barrels for carrying water on the back up the hills; jugs of designs that come from Illyrian days, narrow-necked terracotta with a black painted pattern, vase-like jugs for carrying water from the well, all with high handles; a flat-backed container of wine that fits easily against a wall. Wooden tubs with slanted ends; painted wooden cradles (each district has its own design); round dining-tables not more than nine inches high (here one sits cross-legged to eat.) Large painted wooden chests for the trousseaux of the betrothed.

Lise came to the car to see me off, flung her arms around my neck and planted two kisses on my cheeks. I promised to come back in five years to hear about her studies.

\* \* \*

On our way again. On the hillside a graveyard with white crosses above the well-kept graves, too many of them recording the death of young men. The mountaineer had apparently not only an extravagantly touchy sense of honour but an itchy finger on the trigger.

Along the road we passed a young bridal couple, the bride walking a pace behind her husband (yesterday she would have walked five!). He is splendid in new cheleshe, snowy waistcoat crossed by a golden chain, hip-length coat over black jodphur-type trousers, scarlet brez. She in all her bridal splendour, head-dress of red and white elaborately arranged, and on her breast, catching the sun, row after row of golden and silver coins that formed part of her dowry. Something out of another world!

On a milestone a young woman nurses her baby, the white of her robe against the glittering Mati river, the scarlet and blue of the baby's shawl make a scene that would have tempted



Gauguin. Beside her is an older woman in black and white, both of them hoping to get a lift into market.

We halted a moment at the Mati River bridge to let pass the stream of lorries that keep up a constant traffic to and from the copper-mines at Rubik in the region of Mirdita.

'The peasants there were very backward,' the Professeur said. 'But they are proving very good workers in the mines. These mines were known to the Romans.'

We turned upstream following the 'Road of Light'. When it was decided in 1950 that the Mati Valley was the most suitable place for a hydro-electric station, work was hampered because there was no road by which trucks could carry material to the site. Volunteers were called for. Young people came from all over Albania, among them many peasant girls defying the rigid restrictions on women. Many of them returned to their villages to refuse the marriages the parents had arranged for them! A little freedom is a dangerous thing!

Cut out of the sheer mountain-side, the road winds and twists round dizzy curves, and we squeezed past large lorries coming from the new chrome-mines; past road-menders and peasants; through a tunnel and around a cliff corner to find ourselves breathless before a panorama of soaring peaks above a gorge the Mati has carved through the mountain, with the fantastic island rock of Shkopet standing in the midst of the valley. There, hundreds of feet above us, the cliff-side overhangs the road.

'Have a look!' said an electrician descending from a power-pole. 'We are getting ready to make another hydro-electric station down there.'

I leaned dizzily over the cliff that falls sheer to the river that here runs deep and fast through a narrow gorge.

An older man in full-bottomed trousers came hurrying to us, calling: '*Meena! Meena!*'

'You'd better move round this corner,' the electrician advised. 'They're firing charges.'

I closed my ears as the echoes boomed from crag to crag, watched the rock spray out and fall like a gigantic fountain.

On to Ulez where one of Illyria's richest cultural centres had once been and where three very small modern Illyrians examined our car with professional interest.

Ulez with many newly-built stone apartment houses, a cultural club, school, restaurant, looks down on the lake created by the dam, lying between timbered foreshores with snow-covered mountains rising 6,000 feet above it and reflected in its waters that are the colour of green jade.

For five years, while the men worked to build the dam, a group of Albanian archaeologists worked in the area that was to be inundated. The Valley was once a great necropolis and thirteen tumuli were opened by a new method used by the Russians in the tumuli along the Volga. They showed that Illyrian civilization appeared here towards the beginning of the Iron Age and developed during the seventh and sixth centuries B.C., and one can trace it down the following centuries. According to ancient documents the Pirustes, who occupied the valley, put up a strong resistance to the Romans.

But if I thought that I could escape from Ulez with nothing but some archaeological information, I was mistaken.

The engineer in charge, an Albanian trained in Leningrad, was determined that I should not leave without knowing at least something about the hydro-electric plant which provides power as far as Vlora, a seaport on the south coast. I am afraid that early in the piece he discerned from my expression that there was little hope that I should retain much of the information he rattled off. For his kindness and the time he took from more important things to walk me up and down seemingly endless stairs inside the hydro-electric station I repeat at least three items I recorded under his watchful eye.

One : It was a gift of the Soviet Union ;

Two : It was the training school for Albanian technicians ;

Three : By 1975 the plan for electrifying the whole country would be completed.

I left with my mind a whirl of the past and the future, casting a last backward glance at the lake where men were fishing from a boat that floated above the valley where once their ancestors lived.

## VII

IT WAS a remark made by the Professeur as we looked down on the reservoir at Mati that eventually brought me back in the springtime.

'All that,' he had said waving an arm to take in the magnificent panorama of snow-covered peaks, brown hillsides and rocky valleys: 'That was the Vendetta country. Here the Unwritten Law ruled.'

'Can I go there?' I asked eagerly, momentarily swerving from my search for Illyria.

'Of course,' he replied, adding: 'I came from Dibra myself so I can tell you much about it. But wait a little. The weather is very bad just now and the roads not too good.'

It was mid-May when again I found myself looking down on the reservoir from another aspect, now crinkling pewter grey between green hills over which heavy storm clouds loomed. There was still snow on the high peaks. (A snowfall had stopped me going ten days earlier.)

This time we followed the shores of the lake by a road that rides a ridge with steep narrow valleys on either side and high snowy mountain ranges rising north and south. In the eerie light of a mountain storm, range after range showed in relief, purple and black and a luminous silver. A newly-married couple passed, chatting together, she in the rich white and red and black costume, heavy silver and gilded jewellery glinting on her breast. He in the full-bottomed *prekushe*, red *brez*, new

cheleshe and shop-bought velvet coat—sign of the times. Still more significant: she no longer walked *behind* him but at his side and—greatest of honours—on his right!

A few years ago such signs of husbandly affection would have disgraced him. No modest peasant bride would have dared speak to her husband in public, and when she spoke to him in private, had to do so with her eyes modestly down-cast.

Spring was in the air: everybody was preparing for the local Festivali Folkloristi. Four twelve-year-old boys were dancing by the roadside, a young man in blue dungarees leant in romantic pose against a wheelbarrow plucking the strings of a chefteli, Spiro had a red rose on the dashboard, and whenever we slowed we heard the singing of birds.

Old and new side by side.

A girl in the scarlet citjane of a bride, heavily-laden with a water-barrel climbed up a steep cliff track to a house hung on the hillside among pocket handkerchief fields.

Two women bent almost double under loads of wood, clambered up a rough track to an invisible house. Wood and water carrying are women's traditional tasks in the harsh life of the mountaineer patriarchal family with its scattered unproductive strips of land on barren mountain slopes.

Groups of road-workers widening the road at dangerous pinches, looking like a comic-opera chorus in their prekushe, red sashes, red and yellow sweaters, scarlet and orange head scarves.

A woman cracking stones beside her husband, the baby's cradle sheltered under a bush.

Innumerable large Skoda trucks coming from the chrome mines carrying peasants hitch-hiking a lift.

Tall purple orchids by the roadside, yellow bells, starry white flowers and miniature convolvulus. A newly-erected fountain, capturing the water from the countless springs that gush from the rocks.

Across the road an oriole, a flash of gold. Up the hill the ringing call of its mate. I had seen them so close only in the Western Hills of Peking, and in Morinbong Park in Pyongyang.

The Professeur broke in on my thoughts by remarking casually: 'In 1933 I walked from Tirana to Dibra. It took me two and a half days. The track ran there.' He pointed to a cleft torn in the mountains, indigo under lowering clouds, the snow dazzling in a ray of hidden sun.

'But why?' I asked looking incredulously at the thin little man beside me.

'I wanted to see my friends. We "Gegs" as North Albanians are called, are very clannish. I was an orphan. My mother died when I was three, my father when I was ten. I lived with my grandmother till she died when I was twelve. I became a cowherd for her nephew for a while. Then I went to my other grandmother at Dibra. There was nothing to hope for at Dibra, so, when I was fourteen, at my own initiative I came to Tirana. I wanted to enter the orphan school but I had to wait two months. I had only two Napoleons (less than £1). For two months I was alone in Tirana streets eating as little as possible to make my money spin out, sleeping at night with a friend from Dibra. At seventeen I left the orphan school and went to the middle school and then at twenty-three I became a teacher. That's all.'

That's all! It was a long time before I succeeded in extracting from him more of his story.

No mild school-teacher's life his. Passionate nationalist, he was arrested by Zog's police and imprisoned in 1937. They tried a loathsome form of torture on him: shaving a section of his head and tying on to it a cupful of bugs till the irritation nearly drove him crazy.

He worked in the Tirana 'underground' during the Occupation and though he was well known, no Tiranian ever betrayed him. In the last days of the war his house and everything in

it was burnt in a final wave of Nazi vandalism. They took eighty-four people at random and shot them in the streets.

I muse on the simple way these people tell their stories.

Past Burrel, with new houses, shops, a cinema, schools, hospital, ambulance, to where the valley of the Mati opens between ranges rising to seven thousand feet, their peaks striated with snow, the river meandering through the rich land, sometimes looping back on itself in great U-bends.

On the steep bare hillsides clusters of tiny villages. Sometimes a single kulla stands alone, sometimes a group stands in a farmyard surrounded by a fence of withered Christ's Thorn. Single or in clusters the severe houses have a picturesque charm with lopped trees making a crazy design round them and the contrast of the well-tilled fields where every tone of green is accentuated by the vivid yellow of buttercups.

Beside the road a lonely grave.

'Probably he was killed there and they buried him where he lay,' the Professeur explained. 'Remember, this was the Vendetta country. The Unwritten Law demanded it.'

He paused. 'While I was at the orphanage, a boy came there to escape the fate of his family. He was the only male left.'

Then, returning to history, he pointed to the seemingly inaccessible peaks under lowering clouds, the precipitous valleys where purple shadows brood. 'There are ruins of citadels throughout this valley that bear testimony to the struggle in the early days of the Turkish invasions. But later the bayraktars (banner-bearers) of the tribes and some of the chiefs compromised with the Turks and thus enriched and strengthened themselves. It was out of this class that the Zogollai family which lived behind those mountains emerged, and the feudal chief Achmed Zogu, self-styled King of Albania, who, under Italian patronage, put our country under Fascist domination long before the war came.'

\* \* \*

Beside an ancient single-arched curved stone bridge no longer used, we came face to face with a modern earth-shifter that was making a new road. A wave of greeting, a few shouted words and the driver backed and filled to clear a passage for us.

Then we swept up Bull's Neck mountain in hairpin bends and stopped as a large lorry came round the curve. Frantic hooting on both sides. Spiro leapt out. The lorry driver leapt out. I hoped it wasn't a question of honour! They met and implanted kisses on each other's cheeks.

'*Armik?*' (Enemy) I asked as Spiro came back to the car.

'*Mik!*' (friend) he smiled.

Albanian drivers have nerves of steel and gay hearts and when we met one lorry—with trailer—trying to overtake another on a hairpin bend there was general merriment.

Spiro began singing happily to himself, stimulated by the many warning signs: *KTHES E FORTE* (sharp curve), *PIKE KRYQ* (dangerous point) and wordless black zigzags and exclamation marks that serve internationally when words are inadequate. Such was my confidence in his driving that I began to hum the air of his song.

Into the valley of Bulqize, where streams rush foaming white down precipitous mountains and the river spreads beyond its shallow bed.

Bulqize, a hive of activity with its chrome mine seemingly suspended half-way up the mountain.

We decided to lunch here but the restaurant was full of workers from the mines and we had to wait, so we walked along the muddy road to see the new brick two-storeyed blocks of airy flats built for the mine-workers. A whole world lies between them and the kullas across the valley.

The waiter beckoned and gave us the menu: soup (thickly sprinkled with red pepper); macaroni; meat and potatoes, meat and rice, meat and kos, meat with beans, cream caramel. Bread. Most of the mine-workers bring their own large slabs of



dark bread in preference to that provided. They were just as they came from the mine : in overalls, padded cotton jackets, knee-length rubber boots.

Two sixteen-year-olds beside me were curious and we started a conversation. Both came from the village of Shupenze and had completed the seven-year schooling. They had been working here nine months. They earned five to seven thousand leks a month of which they paid 100 leks a month for lodging in the hostel. A canteen provided them with food for 1,400 leks a month but they liked a change from its menu.

The Professeur recognized his former teacher from the orphanage, now on an invalid pension.

'*Une changement colossale,*' the old man said in the French he had learned in France as a political emigré during Zog's time. 'Here there was nothing. Now some of these men earn 20,000 leks a month !'

Loud voices at a neighbouring table. A young man clearly angry, an older man who evidently had had too much raki shouting at him. 'I'm an old man, you shouldn't talk like that to me.' Then they both laugh, hands go out and they clasp. Much more sensible than gun-play !

Since others were waiting for tables, we didn't linger, but made for the café across the road where a young man invited us to take coffee with him. Son of a poor peasant family of this valley, he was now an electrical engineer in Durres. He had come to Bulqize because of his father's death. He was full of enthusiasm for his new life. Would I stay and meet his family?

Alas, there was no time. We still had a long way to go.

A warm handshake and we were off with rain-clouds lowering over the tortuous road ahead.

Beyond the green valley, stony, arid land. Stone walls dividing poor fields where a few sheep grazed. Then, opening before us, the fertile valley of Zerqan with fields of variegated greens, rich red soil and white houses clustered amid trees.

Three women cross the road ahead of us in the costume of

the region : black and white striped apron over long white pantaloons, a red and black striped surcoat, burnt orange kerchiefs as head covering. One has an L-shaped frame on her back on which a tiny girl is seated, her clothes a replica of her mother's.

Everywhere the same splashes of colour in the fields. Men in white tight-fitting homespun chideke, crimson brez, cheleshes, flatter in form than elsewhere. One pauses in his work to raise a large brown gourd to his lips.

Nowhere in Albania have I seen fields better tended and, surprisingly, more men than women in the fields.

A steam tractor chugs over the rich earth. On the hillside a little shepherd plays his pipe while his flock graze peaceably. Along the road a pack-horse plods with loaded panniers, its young rider perched precariously on its rump.

The river Drin.

The Professeur quoted an old lament :

'The gun has been heard on the banks of the Drin.

Oh Selmen of Bramin

You have been killed.'

and Selmen cries:

'Listen to me, my mother.

Build me a high tomb with two windows.

So that I may see the shepherd and his flock,

The workers in the fields,

The birds that fly

The springtime which flowers

And the nightingale which sings.'

Across the rushing river rises Dibra Mountain, purple under its crown of snow, the Professeur's birthplace (now in Yugoslavia) clustering on its lower slopes, minarets gleaming in the afternoon light.

The valley might have served for the setting of a colour-film with its backdrop of indigo mountain under snow and cloud, its red-ochre foot-hills, roadside hedges full of blossom and small singing birds; a line of men and women hoeing in a

field of chrome yellow, patterned with black, sickle-shaped lines where the compost has been placed.

A string of three horses comes down a side-track, grandfather in white homespun jacket, red brez, cheleshe at a rakish angle leading the first on which sat grandmother, withered face wrapped in a white kerchief, black cloak enveloping her, a baby in a scarlet shawl in her arms. Then a small boy, the miniature of grandfather. Behind them, two men dressed exactly the same leading two horses bearing their wives, one with a little girl in front of her, her scarf a brilliant orange, the other carrying a baby wrapped in vivid blue. Against the green hillside the group was something only the colour camera could capture.

Symbol of the New Day, a group of young women followed them down the track, clearly in their festal clothes.

'You'd never have seen that in the old days,' the Professeur commented. 'Here they were such fanatical Musulmans that women never went out alone. Outside their home they wore the perché. No woman would have dared show her face.'

In pouring rain we made the last stretch over rolling hillsides newly planted with vines, majestic mountains looming so close through the silver light that they seemed to enfold Peshkopi when at last it appeared.

## VIII

**PESHKOP!** The old village with its kullas cramped stage on stage in a rocky cleft; the new rising beyond and above it, with wide streets and wide-windowed houses spreading across the hillside. To the north-east the long dome of Mount Korab, 8,000 feet high, where in mid-August a festival is held that goes back to pagan days. Shepherds say that on a fine day they can see from the summit not only the Adriatic but as far south-west as the Ionian Sea, westward into the heart of Jugo-Slavia and south-east to Salonika.

It was late and I was tired when I found myself in a small villa reserved apparently for specialists. A young man brought me supper on a tray attractively set with fine china and a pot of tea—large enough for six—which I drank to the bottom.

I fell into bed under a resplendent magenta bedspread, gloriously embroidered in gold which I am told is '*shum viet*'—very old—perhaps from the home of some ancient bey. I switched on the bedside wireless, twiddled the knobs, and a familiar voice said : 'This is Radio Australia.'

\* \* \*

The morning came fine and sparkling with the mountains wreathed in mist. Over the breakfast tray I watched from my window a continuous string of peasants making their way to the weekly market.

Later, with the Inspector of Schools and the Professeur, I went down the tree-lined boulevard, with its cinema and new two-storeyed buildings.

'A few years ago Peshkopi was one of the most backward regions in the country,' the Inspector said. 'Now it is the economic and cultural centre of a large district. In the old days the whole district, which stretches south to Elbasan, North to Kukes and Mirdita, was 90 per cent illiterate. Now we have not only the necessary schools, but a Pedagogical Institute to provide the teachers.

'Last year twenty students from the region went to Tirana University—more will go this year to provide the doctors, the engineers, the agronomists, we need.'

I dropped into the bookshop to see what this village of 2,000 people read. The smiling man in charge told me this is the first bookshop the mountains had known.

I went through his stock and was astonished. In addition to Albanian books—novels and poetry and economics and politics—there were numerous translations: Dickens (represented by '*Oliver Tuisti*'!) Tolstoi, Jules Verne, Mark Twain, Byron, Stendhal, Schiller, Zola, Shakespeare, de Maupassant, Mao Tun—too many to remember.

The Ma-Po (general store) up-to-date, bright, well-stocked and crowded with peasants yielded a note-book.

Outside we met the District Head, a man with what I was coming to regard as the typical Albanian face: a forehead broad and high and slightly convex, running into dark wavy hair that early shows a distinctive peaked hairline, a broad face ending in a pointed, slightly jutting chin. The nose that completes the whole is strong: sometimes straight, sometimes high-prowed and long as the profiles of Skanderbeg show him, sometimes aquiline.

'If you'd seen Peshkopi twenty years ago you wouldn't recognize it to-day,' he said. 'We wouldn't have dared walk down the street like this. The Vendetta was the Law. Not a

week passed but someone was killed, not only the guilty. The father of the present President of the Republic was shot here in the open market-place by Zogu's hirelings.

'The Government didn't help us. Far from it. The feudal lords and the bayraktares had complete power, and so long as they supported him, Zogu gave them positions and privileges. They maintained personal armies, sometimes running into hundreds, which frequently clashed. Murat Kaloshi was one of the most powerful feudal lords of the Dibra Valley. His house at Kander, one of the biggest and richest of the district, was like a fortress, with a high wall and watch-towers with guards in them day and night. It was built in Turkish style with separate quarters for women—the "Haremlik". His household contained about forty people plus his private guards.

'He was famed for his hospitality and each night they said a hundred travellers dined in his sitting-room. But so bitter were his blood-feuds that up till the war in 1939 not even his women dared stir outside except under heavy escort or they would have been pitilessly shot. The children of his household were growing up illiterate because they didn't dare to go to school five minutes away! The order was: "Kill at all costs." By then it had become as much a political matter as a question of the Kanun. When he visited Tirana he always went with a body-guard of six, all armed to the teeth, and fought out his feuds even there.

'Indeed the bayraktares played on the Kanun to stir up continual trouble among the mountaineers. There's a story about one bayraktare who was summoned to Tirana to sign some new enactment. Instead of signing he laid his revolver on the paper. When asked the reason, he announced: "That's what I govern by!"

'There's a song here about an incident during the War. A bey sitting comfortably at home looked out and saw a peasant going by. He shot him—no reason. Just sport! Not fearing any retaliation from such a poor family, he went riding proudly

to town. But the peasant's sixteen-year-old son was waiting for him. He shot him dead and ran away to join the Partisans.

'It was incidents like that that helped to break the power of the Vendetta. Many peasants joined the Partisans. Their villages became our bases and they helped us in every way. We pointed out to them that it was senseless for Albanian to kill Albanian when we had first Fascist and then Nazi invaders in our country. During the war the Vendetta ceased. Enemies fought together in the same battalions, lived together; many feuds were reconciled.

'When Liberation came it was explained that we needed every man to build a modern country. There were rare cases of killings after the war, but by then the new ideas had taken ground and public opinion was against it. As the old tribal organization was superseded the standard of living rose. The Vendetta originated in poverty, and many of the feuds rose out of quarrels over grazing, irrigation, etc. With enough for all, it died, though many of the older men complained because their guns and revolvers were taken from them.

' "Give me back my gun," one really good old man pleaded. "A man isn't a man without a gun." '

The District Head left us as he had business to attend to and under the burning sunshine we followed the street dipping sharply into the old market-place in the shadow of the looming Mali Ilneze, indigo under its snow cap. Surrounded by old shops, the square was milling with Malissores—peasants from mountain villages wearing their picturesque folk dress.

Practically everything men and women wear is home-made : the pointed leather opingas; the tight homespun chideke of the men, the thigh-length coats, the cream cardigans of home-grown homespun, home-knitted wool, the vivid brez encircling the waist.

Most of the women wear the type of dress I had seen near Zerqan the evening before with its striking contrast of colour and line, heads covered sometimes with orange scarves, some-

times with the white Moslem kerchief, sometimes with the black chachaf, but there was no sign on the frankly curious faces that they had ever been veiled. The women of Peshkopi have cast off their past more completely than anywhere in Albania.

Spread out for sale : home-made, artisan-made and factory-made goods. Wooden pack-saddles, wooden ploughs, each made of a slender tree trunk the handle framed of a curved branch trained to grow at a particular angle, each worked only with a village-made adze. The price 600 leks plus the steel tip.

My interest in them brought a number of peasants around laughing at the crude drawing I made in my notebook and correcting its errors. Then Ramadan Abdulla, from a village three hours away, hastened to tell me that I mustn't think a wooden plough was all they had to-day. 'We have steel ploughs and tractors. You must come and see; our village is only three hours away on foot.'

I found that distances are always given in terms of so many hours on foot, for even if a family has a donkey or horse, on Albanian mountain roads it can go only at the pace of a man.

We strolled round the market, accompanied by Leme Vranesi whose two greying plaits bobbed on her vine-striped overdress. 'See how much there is to buy! White haricot beans, cheese, dried red peppers, ground red pepper, eggs and bundles of leeks, corn, wheat.' Her pride illustrated how poor was the past.

Lovingly, Leme let the grain run through her fingers.

'Now we buy our bread,' she said and pointed to the queue outside the bakery which indicated that soon here—as in every other village—home-baking would be a lost art.

'Ah!' sighed Leme ecstatically. 'If you knew the time a woman spent making bread!'

She made sure I missed nothing.

A co-operative stall with sheep bells for sale where a peasant was testing their tone, one against the other like a miniature carillon.



Home-made millet brooms; bottles of leeches for home-cures; two-handled water jars; small individual Turkish coffee pots of beaten brass; axe-heads like those from the thirteenth century B.C.; tambourines and strainers and the other oddments that are the speciality of the nomad gipsies who had followed the spring from the south.

We stood on the bridge looking down on the river flat where the fast-flowing Drin's floods have scoured out a pebbly beach, and sheep and goats and cows and calves were herded for sale.

'*Shum mire,*' (very good) I said, pointing to a gambolling lamb which showed unmistakable merino traits, though its mother was the usual long-haired Albanian type.

'*Po si! Merino! Nderzimi artificial!*' a peasant beside me said proudly. (Artificial insemination from the best Soviet Merino rams in the mountain villages!)

Leme felt the soft wool of my cardigan admiringly. '*Shum mire!*'

'But you must come and see our best lambs,' Sherif Iskurti urged. 'We don't bring our best to market. A guest from Australia would be very welcome.'

(Overseas, the fact that I am Australian, obliges me to comment on any sheep I see and be received with reverence in spite of my superficial knowledge.)

Fascinated, a bright-faced boy had climbed on the bridge-coping to listen to the conversation. He is Abduramon Chekichi, fifteen, now in the seventh class, from Kastrioti.

'Ah,' I said, 'the village of the Babe e Babe of Skanderbeg.'

A roar of delight went up that I should know the village of Skanderbeg's family, even if I called a great-grandfather a father of a father!

We shook hands, I promising to come back and see Abduramon when he has achieved his ambition to be an agricultural engineer.

At the end of the bridge a tall, eagle-faced man in his

thirties saluted, hand touching his cheleshe sideways, introducing himself as Vebi Salkurti, head of the co-op of Rashnopoje.

'You must come and see us. We're doing very well. We've improved our crops, our cattle and now we're planting vines.'

'*Po si!*' Leme exclaimed, shaking her plaits vigorously. 'It's better for women, too. Yesterday we counted for nothing. The Unwritten Law called us "anybody's daughters" as though we came from anywhere and had no pedigree. It said we were a sack for carrying things, in our husband's house to work and bear his children. We owned nothing. We stayed at home while the men went to market, did any business, arranged our children's marriages. If we grumbled because they brought home daughters-in-law we did not like, they could beat us and there was no one to whom we could complain. Now the New Law gives us the same rights as a man. No one can look down on us. Now when we work we get our own money. We can go to hospital to bear our children, or if we are sick.'

She put her work-roughened hand on mine.

'Do you know the Unwritten Law considered us of so little value that a female's "blood" was worth only half a male's if she was killed accidentally in the feud? Huh! The good old days! I can tell you no woman wants them back. To-day our men can walk without fear and we can walk where we like, too, with our faces open to the sun.'

A woman took my hand between her rough, hard palms. Her face was lined though she was not old. 'If you knew how much better it is for everyone, particularly the women. If you knew what it is for young girls not to be forced to marry men old enough to be their fathers! Now they don't have to worry if they don't have sons. If you knew what it is to live free—I who was no more than a slave! Now I can vote, I can come to market, I can go to literacy classes. I can go to football matches. Tell them Out There that I, Fatima Dishja, am happy for the first time in my life.'

A tall old man, powerfully built, craggy unshaven, a worn

army coat over his vest, a long silver chain tucked into his striped brez—Hasan Merdini from a village two hours away—greeted me. My hand disappeared in his as he inquired after my health, my family, my country.

‘You have come in a good time,’ he said. ‘Now we can work in peace, no quarrelling, no Vendetta. In the past I wanted to see the sun but I couldn’t see it for my Enemy. Now I can sleep safe in the middle of the road.’

I took ‘to see the sun’ metaphorically but a question revealed it as brutal fact. Hasan Merdini’s family was involved in a blood-feud so bitter that for many years the male members of it did not stir outside the house !

‘A man from the village of my sister’s husband was imprisoned by his Enemy for twenty-five years, and in my father’s time a leading family kept up the feud for fifty years. Of course, if you were weak, blood-money could be accepted in some parts to close a feud, but we in Dibra considered it dishonourable. Blood for blood ! That was the Kanun.’ Hasan shook his grey head.

I shall always regret that my manners prevented me from asking how many Enemies his family had disposed of before reaching the stage of virtual imprisonment.

A passing cloud spilled some heavy drops and we retreated to the Hunters’ Club crammed with mountaineers and with hilarious workmen playing billiards in an adjoining room. Over coffee I learned more about the rigid laws that governed the Vendetta. It became increasingly clear that whatever its ritual aspect, pride was at the root of this killing that everyone to-day agrees was senseless. By his successful killing of The Enemy, the murderer (if one can use such a term where the Unwritten Law not only justified but demanded the act) had proved his superiority. The victim’s family was so degraded by the murder that they had to retaliate or be for ever shamed.

Honour imposed strict rules, I was informed. Hasan Merdini explained : ‘You must not rob your dead Enemy. You killed

only to defend your honour which was the honour of your family and your tribe. When a tribe committed an offence against yours, a group of men went out to take vengeance. There were also rules as to the time within which the "boiling of blood" justified your killing the relative not strictly belonging to the murderer's household. In Dibra it was estimated at an hour. In other regions it cooled more slowly.

Though the Kanun said : "Women do not have rifles" and consequently no blood feuds, some strong women did take vengeance when the males of the household were too slow to act. But in this case there was always the danger of The Enemy saying that a kill by a woman did not count! A woman's role was to urge vengeance. Mothers whose husbands had been killed urged their sons from the cradle to take vengeance on their father's killer. To give him the right temper a baby in his cradle was touched with a revolver.

'A man who was slow to do so found himself publicly disgraced and was considered "bad". He had difficulty in finding "good" families into which to marry his son and daughter. He was subject to all kinds of insults.

'Sometimes a community expelled a killer because he had violated the Kanun—perhaps by killing his host or guest or committing one or other of the murders considered to be against the Tribe. Then he was sentenced by the whole community in the ancient words laid down by the Kanun : "He (the criminal) is burned, roasted, cut down and expelled from the tribe."

'He was forced first to set fire to his own house himself, first to lay the axe to his own trees. His sheep and cattle were roasted for a common feast. He was drummed-out of the village and on the border of his tribal lands he and his wife and children were ordered to leave, never to return! A man was better dead!

'Vengeance taken, the rifle could go to sleep.'

'But how did you live?' I asked, thinking of that houseful of husky males sitting at home twiddling their thumbs.

Hasen Merdini lifted a heavy hand in an expressive gesture.

'*Shum kege!* (Very badly.) We men couldn't go out since The Enemy always watched, so the women worked instead of us. What could you expect? Could women till the land, care for the sheep unaided as well as bring home the wood and water, bear children, cook the food? *Shum kege, shum kege!*'

'Are there those who regret the Vendetta?' I asked.

Hasan stroked his chin reflectively. 'Perhaps when their blood is boiling. But they carry no gun and when it has cooled they remember the New Law and are glad.'

He pronounced the mountaineer's judgment on it: 'It was a bad custom. It is good that it has gone !

'You must come and visit us. Though we have changed we have kept one of our most sacred laws, the law of hospitality. The guest is still sacred. In the old days he came to your house, you gave him food and shelter. If he was killed on his way from your house, you became his avenger. There is no need for that to-day when we all live in peace, but we shall give you our best and be your friends for ever.'

His large hand enfolded mine as I got up to go. '*Mire u pajshim!*' (Good-bye.)

## IX

LATE IN the afternoon I watched the peasants beginning their long trek through the rain. Laden pack-horses and donkeys, sheep, goats, cattle. A woman riding, baby in arms, raised umbrella. Two horses, one with a kitchen cabinet roped to its pack-saddle, a second with long planks to set up a modern kitchen!

Two peasant women, mother and daughter-in-law, stopped to say good-bye to me, pressing their weathered cheeks against mine. 'A pity it isn't fine weather so that you could come to visit us!' Slowly they disappeared into the gathering mist and the shadows deepened on the mountains.

\* \* \*

On a Sunday afternoon I walked through the delightful garden that leads up to the House of Culture, a new two-storeyed building.

Down the steps came a girl, fair hair flying. She kissed me and introduced herself at the same time: 'Vera Nura, Director.'

Inside, a group of men and girls waited for me. Before I knew where I was I had a bunch of flowers in my arms and was listening to a speech of welcome. Peshkopi was certainly putting on its best for the first foreign writer who according to the speaker had made such a 'sacrifice' to visit them.

I indignantly refuted the idea of 'sacrifice' as I was whizzed up and down stairs. First to the Library where the librarian,

another young woman, told me proudly that the Library had 4,000 volumes. Since it was Book Month she had a display of Albanian books. Then to the room where special classes are held for women on cultural matters, hygiene, cooking, sewing.

I was inundated with statistics. In the old days only four girls went to school in Peshkopi. Now there were 1,000! When classes were first started for women there was the greatest difficulty in getting them to come to meetings, even for 'women only'. Now even old ones went to watch sports, and they had developed a passion for the public balls held in the town.

At Liberation over 90 per cent of the women were illiterate; now 'so many' women were working in the Tailors Co-operative, 'so many' were clerks, etc., etc. Women had been elected to the committees of agricultural co-operatives.

Still describing the district's cultural progress, Vera led me downstairs to a hall holding nearly 400 with a fully equipped stage.

'People did not know what a play was when we started, but now we always have a packed house, and they demand more. We have a good amateur theatrical troupe, it has always got second prize in Tirana, but this year it's going to win the first!'

The Music-Room. On the wall a motto in red letters: 'Music is the food of the spirit' above pictures of Beethoven and Tchaikovsky.

An orchestra with a guitar, a tambourine, a piano accordion, a lahuta (a large version of a mandolin), a chefteli, a violin, and large and small drums.

Young men in the ceremonial costume of Dibra, white tight-fitting chidekes braided in black, striped brez, white full-sleeved shirts, wine velvet waistcoats, elaborately embroidered in gold, leather opingas and flat cheleshe. Girls in vivid local costume. Peasants and workers in 'Sunday' clothes.

A visiting music-loving engineer from Shkoder trained in Czecho-Slovakia, dropped in for some music.

While the orchestra was tuning up, the local composer, master at the Pedagogical School, told me (in French) of their difficulty in getting girl-students in their early years because of the fanaticism of the Moslems. Now they had forty girls, and that year fourteen girls would finish the course for the first time.

I met 'our local poet' who had recently published a long poem which sold out in a week, and was now making a collection of local folk-lore.

Vera told me that 849 similar amateur Grupi Culturali were holding competitions throughout the district, and in June the best of them would meet in Peshkopi, to choose those who would go to Tirana for the National Folklore Festival. I was so stunned by the figure that I could not believe it though repeated in Shqip, French, Italian and English till Vera wrote the numbers in my note-book.

The orchestra struck up a modern love-song by the local composer: 'In the garden a flower is waiting for you.' Then one of the young men, Haziz Ndreu, in folk costume, sang to the accompaniment of the chefteli a characteristic song of Dibra's struggle against Haidan Pasha in the eighteenth century. He filled it with such passion that it was not difficult to let oneself be carried back to some mountain-fastness of two hundred years ago.

Haziz's story was typical. He had been a peasant, cow-herd to a bayraktare. When the Italians invaded his country he joined the partisans. After Liberation he became head of his district committee. He became known throughout the whole country by winning the National Dancing Championship and a year later carried off first prize at the Moscow Youth Festival.

The group of four danced a 'Wedding Dance', gay and full of colour.

Followed a song, 'The New Village,' and a song of the partisans.

Then a shepherd lad from a co-operative outside the town



shyly played a long metal pipe. He remains in my mind still—sitting on the edge of the table, in his khaki cotton-padded jacket, his trousers gathered in at the ankle, his heavy muddy boots, looking at me with a deprecatory smile. An unromantic figure. But when he blew into the open mouth of the pipe a melody came, muted, melancholy, such as some Illyrian shepherd might once have played to his flocks on these same hillsides.

The afternoon passed in music, dances, songs (old and new). When I asked Haziz for another traditional song he said rather impatiently: 'But they are all about war. I shall sing you a song about a modern hero, Faik Zala, who was killed here by a tractor on one of our co-operatives.'

The lament for Faik Zala is as full of passion as the challenge to Haidan Pasha. Curious to hear in this wild, strange song in traditional mode, with its oriental accompaniment, the words 'tractori' and 'motori'. But tradition does not die in the mountains. When they came to tell Mustafa Zala that his son was dead, he rose proudly saying: 'I have given my son to my country!'

Last of all Haziz danced to the sound of the drums. He stamped, leapt, and whirled, ever higher, ever faster, furious, passionate, emitting cries that turned the blood to fire. Nowhere in the world have I seen dancing to equal his.

\* \* \*

Looking over town and hills stands Peshkopi's new hospital built in 1953. I was welcomed to it by the French-speaking Director and Physician who did his medical course in Roumania, and by a young woman surgeon trained in Tirana. Not even her white overall and the severe cap could hide the beauty of her face, the straight dark brows and the finely moulded mouth.

Together they showed me over the institution, the Director telling me: 'There was no hospital in Peshkopi district in the

old days. Now in addition to this, which is the central hospital for the region, there is a maternity hospital and there are rural hospitals at Bulqize and Shupenze, and thirty-five ambulances in the district.

'We had many problems when it was first opened. It used to be very difficult to get the peasants to come for treatment. We had to combat not only their fatalism but the fact that the Moslems were so fanatical that it was considered as great a shame for their women to be seen by a doctor as for them to go to school! Children were delivered by midwives with slight idea of hygiene and women relied on magic amulets rather than medicine.'

Smiling, the women-surgeon took over. 'One woman came in wearing amulets from every hoxha (Moslem priest) in the region. We were her last hope! When she began to get better, I saw her myself one day take off all the amulets and throw them out of the window. It was incidents like this that spread round the district and brought men as well as women. At first they didn't want to leave their children here, but when some desperate cases recovered they changed their minds. Now their attitude improves every day.'

We inspected the operating-theatre with its modern equipment from Czecho-Slovakia and the Soviet Union.

'She's a very good surgeon,' the Director said in a whisper as we visited one of the surgical wards, purposely small since the mountaineers are accustomed to small houses and are unhappy in large rooms.

'What did they do in the villages in the old days?' I asked.

'Died!' was the laconic reply.

'Do you have great difficulty persuading peasants to undergo operations?'

'Trouble?' They both laughed. 'On the contrary, they think that an operation will solve everything. When the treatment is rather prolonged they beg us: "Operate and make me better!"'

When I was leaving, the surgeon presented me with a large bunch of the narcissus we call *poetica*.

'They grow wild on our mountains, and are the first flower of spring,' she said. 'We call them the snow-flower. Take them to remember us.'

I took them, so delicate and fragrant, but I had no need of them for remembrance.

\* \* \*

It was raining the morning I left Peshkopi. Earlier slight snow had fallen. All my friends, women and men, came to see me off. 'Come back again,' they urged, and I promised, leaving to a chorus of '*LAMTUMIRE!*' (Farewell) '*MIRE U PAFSHIM*' and '*RRUGEN E MBARE!*' (Happy journey)

I looked back for a last glimpse; the old village tumbling down the cleft in the hill was in shadow; above it the new gleamed in a ray of sunshine that pierced the clouds.

## X

ONE LATE winter afternoon when Shkoder's ancient citadel was silhouetted against a peach-pink sky we wound through the narrow streets of the chief town of Northern Albania, better known to us as Scutari.

Of all the cities I visited, Shkoder left the most Turkish impression : lime-washed two-storey houses with wrought-iron grilles over the windows, turning an almost blind face to the street; high archways with solid doors reinforced with iron.

Here the citjane is different from the one worn in the south—it billows right to the ankles in a gathered bag, like those worn to-day by many Turkish women. Over it goes a large shawl drawn over the head across the shoulders, and falling to the knees at the back. Some are in brilliant colours, striped, checked, plain, others black, and many of the women hold it in such a way as to cover mouth and chin.

As we turned into the hotel drive we met two women—Yesterday and To-day! The mother with only her nose visible; her daughter stepping beside her in a modern suit, her hair flying loose above frank eyes, lipstick on her full-curved mouth, watching us with friendly interest and returning my smile.

Our little hotel was an old-fashioned villa with wide windows and a peaceful charm. Behind it a three-storeyed new tourist hotel was nearing completion.

A freezing wind from the mountains struck me as I got out

of the car and I, too, pulled my scarf across my nose. An old custom can have its advantages!

In justice to Shkoder I should say that when I went back in May the weather was warm and the city ablaze with flowers. The garden of the little hotel was bright with roses and wistaria while above us the acacia trees waved their plumes of blossom and the air was fragrant with perfume.

The wide floorboards of my room were scrubbed white, with here and there typical Albanian rugs in rich and glowing colours. It overlooked the garden where a flock of the slate-grey-and-black birds were settling down for the night in an ancient tree. Somewhere church bells were ringing—Shkoder is the centre of the Catholic Bishopric of Albania. Below, the wireless was playing some of Shkoder's famous old songs.

Next morning as we climbed the steep rocky road to the Citadel Rozafat which has known all the invasions Illyria and Albania suffered, the local archaeologist brought Shkoder's history alive for me.

It is one of the most ancient towns of Illyria with an existence that goes beyond history. At the end of the first thousand years before our era, it was an Illyrian city belonging to the tribe of the Labeates, but later, in the third century B.C., it passed under the domination of the Ardiens, who installed there the capital of the great Illyrian state. Its economic importance in those days is witnessed by the fact that one of its kings, Genthius, struck a currency in his name.

On the way up we stopped by a Turkish tomb—resting place of a Turkish concubine who fell in love with a young Albanian sent to the fortress as a hostage. She was allowed to marry him, because it was the Turkish policy as far as possible to win the affection of the conquered people. She had a reputation for goodness and kindness, and a poem in Arabic on the headstone tells of her virtues. In the old days, it was regarded as a holy grave, and many women came here to pray.

There is an ancient legend telling of the citadel's construc-

tion which is recorded in its name and has been embodied in a long poem. Three brothers worked to build the fortress, but because there was some curse upon it, at night the work done during the day crumbled. An old man passing that way advised the brothers to wall up a living human being in the foundations to appease the evil powers. By guile, the 'choice' was made to fall on Rozafat, wife of the youngest brother.

Rozafat accepted her fate heroically as they built the wall above her, wishing only with her last words that the country should pass into the hands of her son and that future generations would enjoy it in liberty.

My guide showed me the liquid running down the wall that was believed to help nursing mothers. To this day the old people call it 'the milk of Rozafat'.

The citadel was one of the strongest in Albania, built on Illyrian foundations that are still visible.

One enters by three successive doorways, impressive in their thickness and solidity and inside the first door I pressed my hands against the large blocks set in place 2,500 years ago.

Looking at the impregnable walls I wondered what lack of faith or perhaps what treachery lay behind the Roman victory in 168 B.C. of which Titus Livius wrote: 'If the Illyrians had closed the gates and guarded the walls and the donjons and installed garrisons in them, the people who were encircled would have been able to throw back the Romans who would indeed have experienced a defeat.'

But the Romans won and the citadel became the centre of the Roman colony of Praevalitania till the fifth century, when it fell into the hands of the Byzantines and became the most important centre in Albania for the diffusion of Christianity.

In those centuries Shkoder was a rich town, an important trading centre with its own organization of artisans and craftsmen.

When the Turkish Empire began its westward thrust, to protect themselves from the Turks Shkoder was sold to the

Venetians who held it till 1479 when, defeated, it passed to the victorious Turks.

The people would have nothing of the Venetian-Turkish Treaty. They rose and defended the fortress until there remained only a handful of men. Even then they agreed to cease hostilities only on the condition that they should be allowed to go out of the citadel armed. (Years before I had seen Paolo Veronese's mural at the Doges' Palace at Venice immortalizing the heroic struggle of the besieged garrison.) After the valiant defence that had been put up against them by women as well as men, the Turks expected an army to come out; but when the doors were opened only a handful emerged. Whether in indignation or true to their usual habits, the Turks devastated the city.

It was not until the eighteenth century that Shkoder rose to something like its ancient glory.

The fortress is divided into three areas. In the first, to-day there are no vestiges of buildings though in the wall linking the three gates one can see where the soldiers stood to defend the fortress. A blackened section of the wall shows where asphalt was melted to pour on the attacking army—Albanian asphalt provided the weapon which served in ancient wars as 'Greek fire'.

Above an inner archway is a crescent and a star, and higher up, the tail of a Venetian lion. Above the inner gate is a vizier's coat-of-arms.

In the second part there is a mosque constructed on the foundations of a still more ancient church, which apparently was built over a pagan altar. Last of all, a Venetian fortress perfectly preserved.

From the dizzy height one overlooks the whole of new Shkoder with its innumerable minarets and church towers shimmering in the bright air, and beyond lies a panorama of majestic beauty, bounded on north and east by snowy summits, to the west by the rocky hillside of Tarabosh and the Lake of

Shkoder. On the south and west the rivers Bune and Kir make a natural moat at the foot of the bare rocky island on which the fortress stands, their chrysophrase waters streaked with brown, winding slowly across the rich plains where herds of cattle graze amid newly planted orchards. The tinkling of sheepbells comes to us and a small shepherd appears walking along the wall, singing to himself rather than to his sheep a plaintive old shepherd song of the region :

They asked the sheep why it bleated so sadly, to which it replied :

'How can I do otherwise  
For my shepherd has married:  
Whilst a bachelor I tasted the grass of the  
mountain pastures,  
I passed the heat of the Summer under the  
mountain oaks;  
I drank the water from the spring.  
But once my shepherd married, I nibble the  
grass beside the streets,  
I pass the heat in the shadow of  
walls,  
And I drink the water of the gutters.'

Life reasserted itself. Two small boys came whooping up to the plateau kicking a basketball to each other. After inquiring who I was and what had I come for, they attached themselves to me, obviously more interested in the foreigner than in history.

We wandered across the plateau peering into underground cisterns which supplied water to the fortress. To-day, they are still in as good condition as ever. One of them is at least twenty-five feet long and six feet wide and ferns and tiny flowers spring from the crevices in the stone.

My companion showed me a secret passage which led from the upper levels of the citadel out on to the hillside above the road opposite Tarabosh. He descended. This time I refused to follow. But the small boys took my place and sneaked after



him, pretending to be me. I heard nothing until his voice called me from a considerable distance away and I peered over the edge of the wall and saw his head projecting from the opening of the tunnel and two bright faces peeping from under his arms. Legend says there are other secret passages which enabled emissaries to leave the fort without being seen by the surrounding forces, but though my guide has been trying to unearth the Citadel's secrets for twenty-five years he has not found them. The boys offered to help !

We turned back to the large hall that had served as a meeting place for Venetian captains a thousand years after the Romans were driven out. Its walls are nine feet thick topped by a vaulted stone roof, all looking as though it might have been built only a few years ago.

My companion attempted to recreate it for me as it must have been in Turkish days : here the vizier sat in splendour in his gorgeous robes of silk and satin, a jewelled brooch holding the feather in his turban, the signs of power and richness about him. But my mind refused to recreate the picturesque past. In the walls behind where the vizier's chair stood there are iron bars, through which the guards watched to see that all was well. Beyond this, a narrow, sunless dungeon in which prisoners were kept.

Sickened I gazed up at the large hooks used for impaling the condemned, who died slowly and terribly. (I had then not yet seen twentieth-century concentration camps and gas chambers and my stomach was delicate.)

Besides, history clothes events of the past in appearances far from the realities. How grand in print seems the vizier's harem on that missing second floor. In reality it must have been dark, for little light could have come through the narrow slits of windows; and cold, for not even Turkish carpets covering floor and wall could ever remove the chill of winter.

Out on the Place of Flowers, where once the Favourites danced for their master in the long summer evenings, I blinked

my eyes in the welcome sunshine. (When I came back in May purple irises flaunted their flags over the whole space.) Sheep-bells tinkled. Time ran down the centuries as the two small boys with the basketball came whooping over the Favourites' gardens, having persuaded the little shepherd to join them in a game.

'Adio' they called, 'Adio!' and the sound of their young voices echoed among the ancient walls.

\* \* \*

That night I saw the struggle of Albanian against Turk brought to life in a play, *The Seven Shalianq*, based on an actual story out of Shkoder's past. The citadel was re-created as it must have been in the seventeenth century, with rich carpets, luxurious sofa-rugs, gorgeous hangings on the walls, Turks in rich silken robes, feathers and jewels. The heroes of the story, mountaineers, wore the costumes they wear to-day. Indeed, the Albanian characters in the play might have stepped out into a Shkoder street and not attracted any attention.

I visited a house of that period. We went through a large arched gateway decorated with a crescent and a star fitted with a heavy door solidly studded with iron. Above the wall rose the upper storey of the house, its windows covered with elaborate wrought-iron grilles, elaborately carved woodwork on the walls, the richly carved door to the guest room.

The young man who welcomed me explained that this has been the house of their family for generations.

He had slipped off his sandals as we entered, and when I saw the exquisite carpet that covered the floor, I felt guilty in my snow-boots and made a gesture to take them off. 'It doesn't matter,' he said. I stepped as lightly as I could. He said it was a very precious carpet—one from Kossova—and very old. It looked as if it had just been woven. Its colours glowed—a traditional design, red, black and green.

The room was surrounded with divan-like seats, all of them covered with sofa-rugs, and with the padded back covered in rich embroidery.

The walls were hung with carpets. The fireplace was most elaborate, overhanging mantel projecting above the hearth like the top of a richly decorated pulpit with above it a Turkish prayer written in Arabic. 'My father was a religious man,' the young host explained.

Our host went out quietly in his stockinged feet and returned with a large brass brazier, full of ashes. This fitted into the round hole in the centre of the elaborately engraved brass table beside me, and gave off surprising heat. His young brother in stockinged feet with full trousers gathered to the ankles, brought in a tray containing sweets.

The three apertures in the upper part of the wall above the doors, covered with elaborately carved open woodwork, were the windows from which the women watched from a gallery, since they were never permitted, in the old days, to join in any of the social activities that concerned men.

The Professeur told me that in his day he remembered going to a wedding in Shkoder where the wedding song was sung by men and women alternately, in different rooms, so that none should make any contact.

The ceiling was in wood with a richly carved design. Three years were spent in carving the centre rosette, spreading out in the form of a fustanella, the ballet-like Albanian skirt that is a legacy of Roman soldiery of two thousand years ago.

In the afternoon sunshine pouring in through the low windows set in walls sixteen inches thick and covered with elegant wrought-iron grilles, the room has a charm of its own, a charm that took us back to another day and age.

\* \* \*

North-east of the town the hills undulated away to a solid barrier of snowy mountains. On each side of the road peasants

were working in the vineyards that had recently been set, others tending a Jersey herd.

Walking by the roadside women from the Malessia Madhe (the Big Mountains) in costumes I had seen nowhere else : bell-skirts striped in black and white, and of extraordinary intricate weaving, in wavy folds as though made on an elastic base—skirts such as one sees in the murals of bare-breasted beauties of the Creto-Mycean civilization of three thousand years ago.

One, more festively clad, went by with her whole chest covered with silver and golden jewellery of most intricate craftsmanship.

Suddenly the Masi Bridge appeared around a curve, crossing the river at an odd angle and outlined against the stark mountains beyond.

'It belongs to the Turkish epoch,' my companion said, 'but it is thought to have been built by the Venetians, though we do not know even the exact date of its construction nor who designed it.'

Set in this rocky landscape, its ten arches rising in a curve to a wide, high centre arch—a longer Bridge of Sighs—the bridge has a strange beauty. The stone is weathered to a mellow grey which contrasts superbly with the yellow colour under the arches. A laden donkey ambled across—its driver wearing a brilliant yellow headscarf around his cheleshe. Beneath the arches the clear, green water purled over white stones.

On each side of it stretched olive groves, shimmering metallicly in the sunlight. Sheep grazed peaceably on the hillside.

On our way back I was invited to stop at the tobacco-processing factory to take coffee and delicious nut biscuits with the engineer, a blue-eyed Albanian, a very serious young man with a thin face and a Greek nose. I found the offer of coffee was a trap. Willy-nilly I was to see through his beautiful new factory!

The engineer told me that the factory had been built in

1952 as a gift from the Soviet Union, where he was trained. In the old days, though Albania produced much tobacco, they knew nothing about processing it.

Though frankly uninterested in tobacco processing, I was interested in the workers, mostly women, old and young in every type of costume visible under white uniforms: citjanes, long white peasant pantaloons, modern skirts and cardigans. Most of them wore scarves or kerchiefs of some kind over their heads—either the white kerchief of the Moslems or the black of the Catholics and Orthodox. They smiled and waved as I passed. I dropped in at the canteen where five hundred women were having their morning milk, provided free to counteract the effect of the tobacco. They crowded around me, curious, anxious to tell me of the changes in their lives: most of them had been completely segregated in the old days. Some of the older ones told me they had even worn the *perché*, and when they came to the factory it was a terrific trial for them to go without it.

They interrupted each other in their eagerness to tell me of the facilities provided for them: a creche, cultural and sports activities. As one dancing-eyed sixteen-year-old shouted: 'And two weeks' holiday a year.' An old woman shook her head: '*Po si. Po si!* To think that before I never had a holiday in my life.'

\* \* \*

A Bulgarian agricultural specialist in tomato-growing who had come to help Albanian farmers took me to a big collective farm on the outskirts of the city. There the Director proudly showed me the progress they had made and told me:

'The village of Dobrach and surrounding fields up to the end of the war was owned by one of the most brutal feudal beys of the region. He was one of Zogu's supporters and collaborated with the Italians and the Nazis. We were terribly poor. We just existed. I was a cobbler with my father, but I never had a pair of shoes to my feet, even though we made them.

'In the beginning of '42 I joined the Underground. Then, when we chased the last of the Germans out, the people elected me as a deputy. Just imagine it! Me, a boy who had had no schooling. But now I'm finishing my Seventh Class.

'We started the co-operative with twenty-two families. Here is the original document with the peasants' thumb-marks against their signatures, because our people were almost completely illiterate. Now we have one hundred and fifteen families and nearly everyone can read and write.

'Both girls and boys are being educated. There are no forced marriages, and nobody would dream of opposing it when we allot women to important work like looking after the animals.'

I asked what I thought was an innocent question. The Director looked rather sheepishly at his assistant, and then said: 'Well, you see, it's a terribly difficult problem. We *have* no women on the Committee, because the men just won't vote for them. There's still much fanaticism about women in Shkoder. You must remember that this is largely a Moslem village and up to a few years ago, most of the women wore the veil. It has left its mark.'

He looked at me, puzzled and a little unhappy. I was sorry for him, so hard-working, so passionate, so honest and up against the ingrained prejudices of a thousand years.

'All the same,' he said at last, 'we'll have to do something about women on the Committee. It isn't just, the way it is.'

## XI

I HAD heard so much of veiled women and seen so many women who were clearly only one step from the *perché*, and others who persisted in drawing their enveloping shawls across their faces on the pretext of protecting them from the cold wind, that I decided that I must know something more about Albanian women from really authoritative sources.

So I went off to the pleasant garden surrounded by the usual high walls where Zina Franja, Secretary General of the Shkoder Branch of the Women's Union, waited for me at the door of an attractive old house.

'Oh yes,' she said, smiling at the seven other women of the Committee. 'We have quite a story about women in Shkoder, haven't we, girls? In the old days, Moslem women were veiled and strictly segregated so that they never even met a male guest. Infected by the attitude of the Moslem women practically everyone, whether Orthodox or Roman Catholic, wore the veil and took no part in affairs outside the home.

'It was during the war that women first began to play a part in community affairs. When the Italians first occupied the town an organization was formed to help the Underground movement in the town. A fair number of Shkoder women responded, but in general the response was less than in other towns. Some of the women fought beside their husbands and brothers in the partisans. One woman, Shenaze Juka, was killed, and

to-day a Middle School is called after her. Many women were imprisoned.'

She indicated a little, shy, older woman. 'She was badly tortured by the Nazis but she told them nothing.'

The little woman lowered her eyes behind thick glasses, and blushed. Heroism takes unexpected forms.

She pointed then to a dark-eyed beauty with a mane of wavy black hair. 'She was in the partisans.'

'I wasn't the only one. Quite a lot of women were in the partisans. In all there were 6,000 of us. We came from all over the country and from all kinds of families. Women had extra reasons for fighting in those days. We were fighting not only against the terrible poverty of our country which weighed down on us all, and against foreign oppression, but against oppression by the patriarchal family. It seems ridiculous now to tell you what shame fell upon a woman if she went out of the house alone, even veiled. If you were seen walking with a man who was your cousin, the gossip ran so that you were thought to be a bad girl. But that didn't prevent us joining the partisans.

'In addition to the general conservatism, the Ballista, a pro-Nazi Albanian group, made much propaganda against women joining the partisans—they said it was destroying the morals of Albanian women and breaking up family life.

'All of us at that time were gradually learning our responsibilities to our country and what we must do to save it, and to make it a modern country instead of a backward, poverty-stricken place it was, and the first thing of all we learned was that if we were to be free, we had to fight one way or another.'

Zina Franja nodded. 'During the war the women gained the respect and confidence of the whole people, and at the second meeting of the National Liberation Council, held in Berat on 20 October 1944, women were guaranteed equal rights with men.

'In December 1945, in the election of deputies to the People's Assembly, the women of Albania took part for the first time



and the people for the first time had the opportunity to vote for women candidates. Six women deputies were elected.\*

The wearing of the *perché* was banned, but a number of women still continued to wear it—either through backwardness on their own part or because their menfolk would not agree to their taking it off.

'Up to May 1957 many Moslem women still wore it here, but in 1957 our organization decided that we must wipe out the custom for ever. It wasn't easy but our work was rewarded with a mass burning of veils. What a sight that was—between five and six hundred veils burning! Women came out of their houses who had probably never done so in their lives.

'One of our great problems was that so many of our women were illiterate but now all those under forty are literate. It was easy with the younger girls but there are still women among us who are so backward that they won't go to the cinema—men might be there! So, twice a week in the afternoon, cinemas are reserved for woman alone. They are always full.

'To-day in the schools we have courses for women, showing them how to bring up their sons and their daughters without discriminating between them.

'It hasn't been easy. Among the peasants in some regions it was the practice, ingrained from centuries past, that the women worked and the men stayed idle. So the men had to be trained to do their part in the agricultural co-operative, and to admit the women to full equality. Theoretically, it has been done. But in fact, some of the men, even though they do not work as hard as or are as efficient as the women, still have the idea of male superiority. Women farmers who have outstanding records for their work in agriculture still experience difficulties in getting elected to executive positions.'

The ex-partisan became passionate on the subject: 'We

\* In 1964 there were twenty-five women members of the Popular Assembly (the National Parliament) and one of its vice-presidents was a woman. There were three deputy-ministers.

fought in the mountains,' she stormed, 'yet still to-day many who claim to be progressive give only lip-service to the idea of equality.

'True. You must have noticed how the coffee-shops are always full of able-bodied men many of them still only in their early middle-age. They are a hangover from our past. They're called "Stamboul loafers" among us and many of them have never done a day's work in their lives.'

An older woman broke in: 'Although it is far from what we would wish, we really have made very good progress. If you knew what it was in the past! True, sometimes we'll get a rumour that a family in a far distant mountain village is selling a girl in marriage; or that the old custom of the Kanun is being carried on according to which if a brother dies in a family the living brother takes over the widow as a second wife, or rather a tandem-wife!

'An interesting case came to light recently. Two old men had made arrangements between them that each should take the other's sixteen-year-old daughter as a wife, but when the daughters brought the news to our organization we quickly put a stop to it.

'However, each year things get better, and as the young girls grow up they refuse to accept the conditions that their mothers took for granted. They bring their problems to the women's representative in the districts and we are usually able to iron things out. Yes we've come a long way, though we've still a long way to go.'

\* \* \*

At the end of 1961 the Report of the Women's Organization said: 'We must admit that we have not utilized all the possibilities of our equal status. The worst off in this direction are the women and the girls of the villages. Thus, for example, in the course of eight years, the school for managers of co-operatives has trained 3,854 cadres, out of whom only 64 have

been women. A typical case is that of the attitude towards Adivia at the Upper Gjorica who worked and distinguished herself for years in succession. She became known in the province, as well as in her co-operative, therefore the presidency of the co-operative proposed her for brigadier. She won an overwhelming majority of votes at the assembly. But what happened? For two days in succession the majority of the men did not come out in the fields because they allegedly were "ashamed". Adivia worked and she worked very well, and the men, whether they liked it or not, came out in the fields; but the conservatives called on her betrothed who was doing his military service, that he should come and take her because the custom was broken. And finally Adivia fell victim of these customs.

'The new woman knows better how to struggle for her rights when she has an educational and cultural training. We have in mind a girl from Goricani who was excellent in her studies. She was also an activist of the Youth's Union. Her parents, however, under the pressure of fanatics, did not want to permit her to continue her Middle School studies. Everything was said to prevent her from attending the school: "It is not decent for a girl to live in an unknown town among unknown boys and men . . . etc." But she, after having explained to her parents that school was the only path to her future, bade good-bye to her village, and went to school.'

They have indeed come a long way!

\* \* \*

Laje Halili and her tall son welcomed me to their typical Shkoder home.

We talked a long time in the sitting-room, where a fine old handwoven carpet of rich red and blue and green covered the floor and the divans were spread with sofa rugs.

It was a fascinating story she told me, her dark eyes dancing youthfully in a face that, though thin and lined, retained traces of its beauty.

'Now that I look back on it ours was a terrible life,' she said in a deep, contralto voice her hands gesturing rapidly. 'I sometimes wonder how we endured it. Women were "always at the threshold", we never really belonged to the life of the house.

'We were Moslems and all the women in our house were veiled. I was still very young when my marriage was arranged. My husband and I never saw each other until the ceremony was over.

'I was luckier than most. Though my husband was a hoxha he was a most progressive man and therefore I was one of the first women who obeyed Zogu's order for women to unveil, somewhere in 1930 or '31. But when the first days of unveiling came, and no one else obeyed, because of my husband's position and because general opinion was against it I put on the veil again. It was one of the bitterest days of my life.

'However, during the occupation the veil had its uses. Under its cover I succeeded in carrying out many activities with the Underground. The gendarmes could not recognize one woman from another, and I used it not only for the purpose of distributing Underground leaflets but to meet and explain to other women how they, too, could help to fight against the Italians and Nazis.

'Our house was a base for illegal activities. My son here', she flashed a quick smile to the tall young man, 'was only a boy of nine and I used to be constantly afraid for him.

'My husband was also in the Underground. His position as a hoxha gave him great opportunity to make contact with people who were opposed to the Fascists and the Nazis, but who could not come out into the open. At last he was arrested and sent to prison. I shall always remember his last words before leaving here, Fascist guards on each side of him : "I am going to prison, but you must not give up."

'My elder son was a partisan.' She glanced towards the photo of a sensitive-faced young man. 'He was not only a good

man and a good patriot, he was also a good teacher. During Zogu's dictatorship he gave pupils progressive ideas. When the Italians occupied our country, he worked against them. In 1942, he headed the first organized partisan group. Most of them went to the mountains, but a number of them remained here in the town as Underground workers. My son was one of them. The house was often searched, but we had a secret place in which he could hide.' She opened a wardrobe in a corner of the room and showed the sliding panel in the back that led to a second door in the wall. 'At night he was always out.'

She placed a hand over her son's hand. 'Though this boy was only nine years old at the time, he worked in a cigarette factory, because neither his father nor elder brother had any income.'

Some poignant memory affected her. She stopped, her throat working, suddenly stood up and took the coffee tray into the kitchen.

Her son looked after her with love and sympathy in his face.

'There are many things that mother has not told you,' he said. 'My brother was killed by Fascists. One night he went out on his Underground activities during the blackout and somebody who had been watching the house followed him. He ran away but was encircled in a house he entered. They called on him to surrender. He fought and was killed.'

The mother came back, sat down again and took up the story.

'I haven't told you about my daughter. She was as much a hero as my son. She was married at the time and lived in Durres. She was actually in the fighting ranks of the partisans and was arrested. She managed to escape, and came here and lived here illegally. By this time she had discarded the *perché*. Now she veiled herself again and went about the city distributing leaflets. She and I used to go out together.

'After the Liberation, I worked for the hospital organization, urging women to get schools and hospitals for their children. In

1947, I and my children took part in the construction of the first railway to Durres, the first obvious progress in our country.

'What I did as the wife of the hoxha had much influence. Not only did I work to persuade women to take off the veil, but my husband, as chief hoxha of Shkoder, held many conferences to explain to them as well as to their husbands, that wearing the veil was out of date and had neither religious nor moral significance.

'I was lucky in my husband. Even when he was very ill, he never stopped me working, because he felt it was so important that women—particularly women like me who had had unusual opportunities—should help to teach other women how they could make use of their new freedom. Even towards the end, when I was sometimes away for the whole day, he never complained. He was as much a hero as his son. He did great work for our freedom. I am glad to talk to you about him. He died only a year ago to-day.

'Now I am a member of the Women's Organization and a member of the People's Council for Shkoder so I'm kept very busy, but we've learned to plan our work and I never feel that I'm neglecting my home for what I am doing outside. My son and I live very happily together. He is now a legal prosecutor and I am assistant judge, and sometimes it happens that in court we are in conflict over a case.'

They smiled tenderly at each other.

She made a wide gesture as though gathering past and present together. 'Sometimes I regret that my dear son did not live to see what we have achieved. But at least I know he did not die for nothing.'

There was much more that I would have liked to ask her but the sun was beginning to sink over the Adriatic and Spiro reminded me that we had a long drive before us. Laje Halili gave me once more a warm kiss on both cheeks and a firm handshake, and I went feeling that I have left behind a part of Albania's history.

## XII

UNDER AN apple-green sky streaked with gold, we went south again intending to spend the night at Lesh—site of the Lissos of history, which was founded in 385 B.C. by Dionysius of Syracuse. Five miles away at Nymphaeum Mark Anthony disembarked his troops to march against Pompey. There too (it was then Shengjin) on 7 April 1939, the Italian Fascist troops landed.

At last we saw the ruins of the citadel where Skanderbeg died outlined black against snow-covered mountains rosy in the last light.

Darkness had fallen by the time we found our lonely hotel in the midst of a flat countryside, and the only light in the landscape was the afterglow reflected from the marshy lagoon from which came the incessant quacking of ducks. An impressive stone entry seemed incongruously grandiose for a low timbered building rather like Hollywood's idea of an American millionaire's hunting lodge.

It seemed deserted but at last our knocking and calling brought a little woman, a flickering oil-lamp lighting up the white scarf enwrapping her head, a straight black fringe above liquid eyes in a plain face—the whole like something out of a fairy-tale. She explained that the hotel was open only for six months during the hunting season; that we were not expected, but they could manage to put us up if we didn't mind waiting.

She led us into a large room of pretentious rusticity with a

splendid stone fireplace, comfortable divans and low tables topped with ornamental tiles. The lamplight flickered on antlers' heads hung on the wall; on a stuffed pelican; on glass cases containing fish that would have saved any fisherman the conventional lie.

'If we had known you were coming, we would have had the electric light plant going,' she apologized.

I was happier with the lamplight, particularly when she led us into a smaller room with its own stone fireplace and divan-type benches beside it.

In a few minutes Spiro had a roaring fire going, complaining, with hands at the back of his neck, that he had a neck-ache. We implied that it was due to his habit of looking backwards after girls. He denied it, smiling his wide smile, his ripple of comment and laughter keeping us all amused although we were tired after a long day.

We tucked ourselves up around the fire in our heavy coats, but gradually began to peel off as it grew to bonfire size. The cook appeared carrying a tray with coffee and tea, set with fine china. He shook hands and welcomed us, explaining that the waiter was out hunting so he was doing the job for him. He had donned his cook's cap but the rest of his clothes were more suitable for hunting, from which obviously he, too, had only just returned.

We took our tea in front of the fireplace from a low table of elaborate pseudo-rustic type, carved out of a solid piece of wood, pitted to give the effect of natural marking. The stools matched it and it was obvious that they had been made with the greatest skill to keep up the pretence of rural charm. Everything spoke of money poured out regardless.

The cook explained :

'The hotel was built by the Italians when they were here. It was intended only for Ciano and his distinguished guests.'

Looking into the fire, he paused, then gave an ironic laugh. . . . 'He never came here. . . . The game was good, but



it was the wrong kind of hunting.' In the glow of the firelight his mouth widened in a grin: 'The mountains around here were full of partisans.'

He went out to prepare our dinner still chuckling to himself.

We were joined by seven newcomers. One—a worker from the tobacco factory in Shkoder—recognized me. The two drivers knew Spiro. (Who didn't?)

We settled down to a long chat. I learnt what the men's jobs were, how much they earned, what they did and a good deal about conditions in old Albania as well as new. Then the waiter bounded in, wearing full hunting rig, introduced himself as Shabarn, and sat down with the others to ask questions about Australia. I had practically exhausted all that I knew about my country when Shabarn left reluctantly at a call from the kitchen and the seven men followed him. He returned with the dinner—minus his leather jacket and wearing a white coat above khaki hunting breeches and wading boots.

We ate from the low table. Hors d'oeuvres of salami and sardines, goat cheese and pickled onions with delicious brown bread. Then an excellent soup, and chicken chops with potato chips; small cheese cakes, crowned with a bottle of good red wine.

While we ate, Shabarn—refusing to sit down now that he had put on his official jacket—told us about the years of the war. The Nazis attempted to burn the hotel when they were going. 'But we saved it. In those days there was quite a wood round here. It was easy to come right up to the hotel without being seen and the partisans knew the marshes and the woods as the Nazis and Italians never could. Oh, yes we saved the hotel all right.'

There was a smile of grim satisfaction on his normally pleasant face.

I went to bed early. My suite had all mod. cons: shower room, toilet, a well-sprung bed with handwoven rugs covering it. My window looked over a chattering river and away to the

lagoon where a new moon and Venus were reflected in a luminous mirror. Night birds were calling and I listened to the ducks quacking in endless conversation and the little dark woman singing a cradle song :

Oh little lamb where are you going to wander this evening?  
In the meadow, and under the cherry trees.  
What do you see there?  
Twin birds.  
What songs are they singing?  
Chili, chili, mangouli!

A dreamless night.

\* \* \*

Next morning, after an excellent breakfast, Shabarn showed me the twin suites in Ciano's self-contained wing linked to the main part of the building by the impressive entrance.

'One was intended for Ciano's friend, Ribbentrop, but he never came here either.' Shabarn stood looking around, his hands on his hips, a tall, strong figure in the hunting clothes over which was his waiter's coat, a smile of pride and satisfaction on his face. 'They never came here at all.'

Affectionate farewells from the little dark maid and the cook, and from Shabarn, who at the last minute appeared carrying a wild duck, its neck feathers glinting green in the sun.

'Take it with you,' he said. 'Somebody will cook it for you at the hotel.'

We went out under the archway, and I looked back to see them all waving to me till the curve of the road hid them from sight.

### XIII

EASTER SUNDAY. We sped along the road to Lac, the air tremulous with the sound of rejoicing bells.

Spring, with the blossoms white and pink on the hillside and the tender new crops emerald green against the chocolate earth. Young lambs gambolling over a floral carpet of magenta orchids.

Spring on the plain but snow still on the mountain tops stretching to the north and south, and Dajti's crown glistening like crystal sugar.

I owed the invitation to spend the day with a patriarchal family to my friend the Dramatist, whose family for generations had been linked in friendship with my hosts-to-be.

His wife had gone on ahead the night before to calm any apprehensions they might have at entertaining a foreigner for the first time, and a woman at that! What honours these old families are accustomed to lavish on guests are traditionally directed to men.

At last we stopped and made our way over a track trodden across ploughed fields, and through an orchard where the pear trees were tossing white masses of bloom, the air full of the scent of honey and the humming of bees.

At the gate leading into the farmyard the family was waiting to welcome me: the mother, four of the five sons and their wives. The sons stepped forward first to be presented in order of age. All gave me the ceremonial kiss—a touching of cheek

to cheek three times. Only then was the mother presented, a shrivelled old woman with her head enveloped in a fashion I had not previously seen, woven-wool black skirt with a reddish border falling just below her knees, handwoven white apron—the dress of Kosova, now in Yugoslavia, from which she had come thirty years before! Then the five daughters-in-law kissed me, the three older ones in traditional dress, the fourth wearing modern clothes, and carrying a two-year-old child. Her blue eyes looked into mine with an air of more than formal welcome and her work-worn hand clung to mine as though to tell me that she, unlike the others, would—if she had her way—break from the old rules. Then came the youngest daughter-in-law, resplendent in her bridal robe who kissed my hands as custom enjoins.

We went across the rough courtyard surrounded by low buildings, the Dramatist whispering in French that as each son marries a new room is added.

The Patriarch awaited us in a simple room with low white-washed walls, small windows closed by wooden shutters, the focal point the hearth with its overhanging chimney-piece. The old man rose from his seat at the right side of the fireplace, a white cheleshe topping his grey head and making him seem taller, a white hand-knitted cardigan over a shirt that was clearly hand-made, blue eyes peering at me rather sternly. Tall, dignified, he bent to put his rough cheek to mine and welcomed me.

On the floor—flagged with roughly-hewn stone—first thick mats of woven reeds, and on them the carpet, patterned in red, blue and green. We all took off our shoes and as the Patriarch sat on the goat-skin placed on the bright handwoven carpet, I—prompted by the Dramatist—sat down opposite him. The Dramatist sat beside me acting not only as my introducer but as interpreter. The sons seated themselves in a half-circle in front of the fire. The mother sat behind them on a little stool placed well back, the third daughter-in-law stood in the door-

way and the two older ones seated themselves on a divan against the back wall. Clearly the honours of hospitality as the Kanun enjoined were still a masculine affair but only a few years earlier women never entered the guest-room except to serve.

Cross-legged, the Patriarch began to light his long, richly-chased silver pipe with a bulbous amber mouthpiece. There was a long and, I feared, disapproving silence.

From the expression of all the eyes turned on me, I realized that for the first time in this house a woman had taken the seat of honour! Catching the eye of the third daughter-in-law fixed on me in wonderment from the threshold, I smiled and made myself at ease against the gaily embroidered pillow which served as an elbow rest, as though shattering the Kanun was an everyday affair to me.

At last the Patriarch cleared his throat and said without looking at me but clearly intending rebuke :

'In *our* country it is the custom of the women to respect the men more than the men respect the women.'

I asked : 'Why?'

The word dropped like a bomb. Stunned glances exchanged by the sons. Excited chatter among the women.

The Patriarch took his pipe from his mouth, which remained open, gaping at me. Then his face crinkled into a myriad wrinkles. He slapped his thigh and laughed. We all laughed. The ice thawed. He struggled with my name and I with his—Ndue. And his wife's name? 'Maria,' he said speaking for her, as I'm sure all his life he had spoken for her.

The unmarried daughter came in with the fifth son and the father presented them all to me by name : all were wearing ready-made corduroy-velvet coats over their *prekushe*, from which protruded the gaily-coloured socks the women had spun and knitted in intricate patterns, *cheleshes* set at various rakish angles on their black hair.

I asked the daughter-in-law's names. Only then, at my

request, was I introduced to them—something the Patriarch found distinctly odd—in order: the oldest, too careworn for her age, who had, I think, long given up any thought that she was once beautiful. The second, black-eyed, madonna-faced, black veil worn in a special drape across her head—indicating that she was in mourning for a sister who had recently died—young, and betrothed. The third—flat cap and silver ear-rings and a gold-embroidered red jacket worn above a full white skirt.

Last, the young bride who had been married only a year and wore the Catholic folk costume of the region at its richest—red velvet jacket over white blouse, very full white skirt, hand-woven waistband of many colours. Suspended from an intricately woven chain a large cross of silver and gold (or gilt) of fine craftsmanship studded with semi-precious stones, her silver ear-rings of a design that came from her Illyrian ancestors.

Throughout the day she stood, eyes downcast, under the corner shelf on which stood the coffee utensils. Tradition insists that the coffee cups never leave the guest-room, probably a relic of the old days when patriarchs feared that the women would take on the strictly masculine habit of coffee drinking.

It was soon clear that the Patriarch, however he might insist on his ancient rights, was really more loved than feared by the family, which embraced twenty-four members. 'All three generations here together,' he said, obviously proud of it. 'But alas, now, my wife has become old!'

'And men in Albania do not become old, too?' I asked.

He took this as an enormous joke and laughed loudly, slapping his thigh with his hands while his sons rolled on the carpet with amusement.

The bride brought in coffee and served it to us on a small platter in tiny cups, the real *café turq*. The Patriarch took his cup *after me*, which the Dramatist whispered was a great con-

cession. He offered me a cigarette and there was much excitement among the women at the back of the room as he lit it for me.

The Patriarch spoke solemnly :

'Because you have come to my house as a friend, you will be my friend for ever. It is our law in Albania—the law of hospitality. We are your friends to protect and defend you wherever you may be and may you be happy in our house. I am glad that you come to us in a time of peace. When I was a young man it was a time when we were always fighting—if it wasn't the Turks, it was someone else. All my life I have known nothing but fighting, and in my young days in the villages, we knew only the law of the gun—the Vendetta ruled everything. But to-day, if a man offends you, then you take him to court, and the matter is settled without the shedding of blood on either side.

'It is better so. In the old days, if a man stole my sheep, I made him swear that he had not stolen it and bring me twenty-four honest men who would swear to his honesty. But there were men who took the oath when we knew it wasn't true. If a man committed perjury, then we had a way of making him feel he didn't belong to us any more. For instance, if a perjurer came to sit in my house, I would offer him coffee not as it is offered to you, but under the leg.' He raised his leg and passed the coffee cup beneath it. 'Then he would know and he would creep from my house because he had been dishonoured.

'If you had come to visit me in Kosova I would have invited you into a house very different from this because there we were a great family, but we had to leave Kosova and I with my wife and my small son and my brothers made our way through the mountains with only a cow and came at last here to Lac. It was a terrible journey, through the mountain passes and over the mountain peaks. It took us a year. We rested in the mountains before we started the descent to the plains.'

He looked at me with a frown and asked abruptly : 'Do you have devils in Australia?'

I dodged the question saying : 'It all depends what you mean by devils.'

He shook his head : 'Oh no, I don't mean human devils, I mean real devils.' He leant forward and said solemnly : 'I met devils in the mountains.'

With a fine sense of the dramatic, he paused. 'It was a dark night. We had been a week without food. We came one night when the dusk was falling to a fountain, and somewhere in the forest beside us a goat was calling. And my brother wanted to go and kill the goat because we hadn't eaten, but I said No, because I knew it was not a goat. And then suddenly emerged in the darkness, more dark than the dark around us, five figures, black from head to foot, and they stood there watching us, and they said not a word, and we said not a word, and then after a while they went away. Now what do you think they were if they were not devils?'

\* \* \*

The bells begin ringing joyously from the Church on the hillside and I went with the sons across the fields, to hear the Easter Mass. It was hot, but a chill wind was blowing from the mountains. We crossed a little stream straddled by a small water-mill and the first son explained : 'We sell most of our grain to the State. Our own meal we grind here.'

The bell was still clanging as we went up the hill. It stopped as we reached the church, the bell-ringer gazing in amazement at the foreign visitor.

An overflow of men oozed on to the porch and we squeezed our way through them into the crowded, ugly church, its only decorations crude pictures of the Stations of the Cross. On one side sat the men, on the other the women, most of them wearing the white surcoat of homespun wool, bearing on the back the Cross outlined in red and black so that, for the



moment, I had the illusion of seeing Crusaders returning from the Crusades. All heads were swathed either in black or white veils. Near me, a little girl of three wearing a perfect miniature of her mother's robes turned to gaze at me. Beside me, were several hunters carrying their guns, their coats encircled with bandoliers full of cartridges, apparently waiting for the first minute they could decently leave the church to go to the hills.

When the bell on the altar rang for the Consecration, the bell-ringer outside tolled the large bell lustily, and the message of Christ's resurrection echoed over the sunlit valley and away to the sea, misty blue on the horizon. At the end of the Mass (said in Latin), prayers were said in Albanian, only the men making the responses. The Dramatist whispered that their prayers were more than four hundred years old, and were the first signs they had of an Albanian culture during the Turkish conquest.

Outside I stood and watched the congregation pouring out, the women each a replica of the other, robes differing only in age. They exchanged Pascal greetings with one another and young red cheeks and old withered cheeks were pressed against mine and innumerable voices called: '*Per shum viet Pasqat.*'

It was a scene out of another age to see them pour down the hillside against the blue of the sky, the green of the grass and the blossoming trees.

A woman ran out from her newly-built house by the roadside and pressed upon me a red egg, the Pascal egg. She was followed by a young man who put in my hand another egg. The crowd gathered round and when at last I went, my pockets were filled with scarlet eggs and my hands with branches of blossoming plum. I walked home beside the Patriarch's grand-daughter aged thirteen. 'What are you going to do when you leave school?' I asked.

'Why,' said her father, 'prepare her wedding clothes, of course.'

'But surely no one needs to spend five years preparing wedding clothes?'

'Oh yes,' he said. 'All the other girls spent all that time and so did the youngest bride. She brought twenty robes that will last her all her life, even to her death robes.'

An old man waited at the gate to shake my hand, telling me in English that he was in the Australian Army in the First World War. Would I give his greetings to the old Diggers of the 13th? Then Time seemed as though it had no meaning at all and space was something that concertina-ed in one's hands.

\* \* \*

While we had been attending to our souls the Marthas of the house had been busy with more material things and there was lively chatter from the kitchen.

The Patriarch was still by the fire.

We took our earlier places. I did my best to cross my legs as he did. The youngest daughter-in-law brought to each of us in turn (beginning with me!) a brass hand-basin. From an engraved brass jug she poured warm water over my hands, then I was given an embroidered hand-towel that served also as table-napkin.

The older daughters-in-law put on the carpet beside us a large round table not more than ten inches high. On it they placed, one after the other, little cone-shaped bottles of raki so that each of us had our individual bottle. I have long regarded raki, along with vodka and mo-ti and other fire-waters, as being more suitable for jet-fuel than human stomachs, so when the toasts were proposed I sipped it only. They were disappointed.

The Patriarch apologized: 'Alas, we are backward here in Lac. Had we had time to go to Tirana we would have bought something that you would have liked better, but here, alas, we have only raki which we make from our own grapes. It is

good raki, though I say it myself, and each year we make a considerable profit from its sale.'

I apologized, in return politely attributing my abstemiousness to health, not aversion.

In came: delicious home-grown fresh shallots; plates of goat cheese; of dried meat; of eggs and olives—all of them grouped round the salt-dish in the centre of the table—delicious home-baked bread, made from their own flour.

As they got through the second bottle of raki there was much laughter. The young bride stood aside near the door all the time, with lowered eyes that still watched every movement to see that we lacked nothing.

They told me with justifiable pride that everything that had been served was grown on their own land.

I was doing well till I discovered that this was only the hors d'œuvres to go with the raki, and that the real meal was to come. To everybody's amusement, I broke off hastily.

The Patriarch insisted: 'You must eat everything that's here. You are at home. You must remember you are at home, for you have eaten with us bread and salt, and here we have a saying "Bread and salt and heart".'

The hors d'œuvres were cleared away and the daughters-in-law placed on the table a large bowl of stewed pork, and a bowl of stewed beef, this bought from the village butcher. They explained to me that they had beef as well as pork in case any Moslem friends should drop in. Knowing that the Dramatist was also a Catholic I realized that their scrupulousness had been in case I, the guest, should prove to be a Moslem!

The daughters-in-law disappeared to eat with the mother in the kitchen.

Throughout it all the youngest son remained seated on the divan at the back of the room with his ear clamped to the ear-phone of the crystal-set, completely enchanted between listening to the radio and listening to us.

Everyone pressed food on me. Macaroni was piled on my

plate and when I say piled, I mean piled; pork and the delicious gravy from the pork, since I'm not a Moslem, poured over it. We went on to beef and rice. Then came an enormous sweetish tart with much butter in it. With difficulty I managed a slice for I had reached the stage where it is absolutely impossible to eat more even in the interest of hospitality and friendship.

The bride served the thick sweet coffee, and we drank slowly. By then I was so completely a member of the family that the Patriarch had begun tossing cigarettes across to me, I catching them with a facility that aroused his admiration. He went so far as to take a twig from the fireplace, and light my cigarette with it.

When we had drunk the coffee, and the bride had taken the cups away, washed the cups and put them back on their special shelf in the corner, he expanded and told me that everything they wore—except the corduroy coats—had been made in the house. Once the mother and the daughters-in-law had also spun and woven the cotton for the shirts, but they now found it cheaper to buy it. 'But everything I have is homespun and home-made,' the Patriarch said. 'I have even prepared my death-robe.'

Perhaps sensing that for a Westerner death is not a dinner-time subject of conversation, he added: 'I do not fear death. I should like to have a proud death like a friend of mine who used to live in the mountains. I heard that he was sick, but since I had spoken to him the day before I did not believe it and went to see him. There he was, sitting up in his place by the hearth in his best clothes smoking his best pipe, and I said to him: "But you are not sick!" and he said: "To-morrow I shall die."

'I said good-bye to him and went away still feeling that he was not ill, but a few hours later they came and said, "He is dead." Yes, I should like to have a proud death like that. Things have greatly changed in the last years, and they will change

more, and I think perhaps it's for the better. But not for me.'

Clearly to change a painful subject the eldest son said: 'We're going to build a new house very soon. We have plans for it. We have prepared everything for it ourselves. We have carried the stone, we have cut the wood, we have made the lime, and now soon the masons will come and will build our house.'

He brought the plans and showed them to me proudly—a two-storey house over sixty feet long and thirty-five feet wide with sixteen rooms. Evidently the family felt that it was going to last for a long time yet in its present form.

'Then when the house is built,' the eldest son said with a hint of the Patriarch's authority, 'we will either enter the agricultural co-operative or perhaps go to work in the factory that is going to be built near here.'

The Patriarch nodded—the nod that in Albania means No. 'We are a co-operative in ourselves,' he insisted. 'We need no other. In the old days the master of the house had many responsibilities to do his best for his family—it was not necessarily the firstborn who was designed to be Master but the most competent. He had to get the taxes lowered and unpaid work on government roads lightened. He was responsible for the behaviour of the family—not that I ever had any trouble with mine.

'At home he was responsible for the organization of the house, assigning each day to man and woman a daily task.

'Nowadays, each night my family meet and discuss affairs, and the tasks for the following day are allotted. The boys have their own work. In general the women work in the house, the younger of them and the stronger take a large part in the work of the fields. No! I shall keep my own co-operative. My sons obey me, my sons' wives obey me and my grandchildren obey me. Once in the local co-operative they will no longer obey me.

I shall live this way and die this way. When I am gone, it is for them to do what they wish.'

'Do you have a family like this in Australia?' the eldest son asked me.

'Not *quite* like this.' I went on to explain that 'family' in Australia means only the mother and father and children.

The elder brother exclaims: 'Oh, ba, ba, ba, ba!!' at such an extraordinary way of living. 'Why,' the second said, 'if I am two weeks away without seeing my brothers, I go crazy.'

And the Patriarch added: 'I have five sons, and when one goes to the army, my wife cries all the time.'

He looked thoughtfully into the fire and said at last: 'I know in Albania we are backward in many things but I think our family way is a very good thing. My sons and my uncles and my cousins are always in my heart.' He drew himself up proudly: 'Within my family there are fifteen families of my blood.'

The eldest son demanded: 'What happens to your parents when they are old?'

I explained that good people among us considered they had a duty to them though they might not be living together.

'*Shum mire! Shum mire!*' He shook his head vigorously, pleased to know that we were not entirely inhuman.

I had remarked that in all the recital neither mothers nor sisters or wives were mentioned and I asked on a moment's impulse: 'Did you choose your son's wife for him?'

The Patriarch looked at the blushing bride who still stood with downcast eyes in the corner, and said: 'Of course! At least, I chose the family. She comes from another village. If a family is good, you can rely on the girl being good. If you find a flower on a thorn, it's no good. Some day you will see that you will grow thorns and not flowers. Of course, if my son had objected I would not have insisted.'

The youngest son, his ears still clamped to the earphones,

smiled beatifically both at father and bride and was clearly perfectly satisfied with the choice that had been made for him.

Then I revolted at this excessively male atmosphere and announced that I should like to see her famous trousseau. So we went out together to the kitchen where four painted cradles were drawn up to the open hearth.

The women greeted me joyfully. Away from the men they were transformed. There was much laughter and much conversation which I untangled with the help of the Dramatist's wife.

We went to the bride's room, white-washed within, with a high attic ceiling, an earth floor. Its furniture consisted of a large double bed with a handsome hand-woven quilt upon it over an exquisitely embroidered linen cover and pillow-cases. The bride opened up the large chest painted in traditional designs and showed the trousseau that took five years to make and was to last her all her life. She had woven on her own loom the woollens and the cottons and embroidered everything lavishly and with exquisite taste.

There was a moment of whispered discussion and giggling among them and I realized that they had decided to dress me up. Off came my unromantic cardigan and blouse although they exclaimed at the softness of the wool and found the nylon a subject of great interest, felt it and tested it and decided that it was '*Shum mire!*' Off with my slacks amidst much giggling at my nylon undies. On with the white cotton ankle-length pantaloons ending in a small frill. There was room for another person in them so evidently the wardrobe was designed to adapt itself to all the changes the figure might undergo.

Over the pantaloons a skirt at least six yards wide, of heavy hand-woven cotton, with a drawstring in the waist that allows for indefinite expansion. I began to assume the proportions of a bell-tent. Into this the finely tucked blouse, buttoning to the throat and with full sleeves buttoned to the wrist. It was tucked

in such fine tucks that I asked : 'How long did it take you to make it?'

'One day,' the bride replied. 'I have a *machina*.'

Then came the red-striped tufted apron, also handwoven. Into that was tucked a handsome fringed yellow scarf, over that again a mauve scarf, and, last of all, one of apple green, each so arranged as to show the other. Over all that went the sleeved jacket of red velvet embroidered with gold and black, and showing the fine pleating of the blouse beneath. I was already weighed down by what I had put on, but they hadn't yet finished. From the box the bride brought out the woollen Crusader-type surcoat, spun and woven by herself, that would reach to the calves of her legs but reached well to my ankles.

The elder daughter-in-law rushed in with a black fringed scarf which she knotted in the correct fashion around my head, covering the forehead but leaving the ears free. Impulsively the bride, laughing as if she had forgotten the creature with downcast eyes I had seen all day in the guest-room, took off the heavy cross and chain of finely worked gold and silver and put it around my neck saying as she patted the cross : '*Yam katolico*.'

My appearance in the courtyard was greeted with shouts of delight by the men of the family, and I went with crossed hands and lowered eyes to the Patriarch and said : '*Nuse jashte*.' (The daughter-in-law from another village.) Whereupon he kissed me with a warm smack on each cheek, and I felt that I was really a member of the family.

The sun was low by now and it was time for our long drive back to Tirana. I changed my clothes reluctantly, for it marked the end of something precious.

The whole family accompanied me as far as the outer gate and into the orchard, and there, at a certain point, the Patriarch said : 'The women will now say good-bye.' And they said good-bye, kissing me as though I was indeed their sister, warmly and affectionately, three times and three times three.



And when Sofia, the unmarried daughter, said good-bye, there were tears in her eyes; there were tears in mine too, because here I felt I had found something that was basically good and honest, even though its form must go.

They stood waving to me as we crossed the orchard to the road, the men accompanying us, and by now all the grandchildren of the male sex tagging along, too. At the car our farewells began. They were protracted, because each of the brothers gave a kiss that had by then ceased to be token.

The Patriarch kissed me, and when I said '*Adio, Babe,*' he kissed me again, assuring me that I should be ever in his heart.

As the car moved back on to the road I heard their voices calling : '*Rrugen e mbare! Mire u pafshim!*'

They had given me bread and salt and heart, and in return I left mine with them.

## XIV

ONE OF those bright spring evenings in Tirana with an electric-blue sky resting on a rim of indigo hills.

Sauntering along by the rose-gardens—already in full bloom—I met Liri Belishova with her husband and two small daughters. Petite, elegant, in a well-tailored suit, high heels, Liri's warm smile lit up her face, her dark wavy hair blowing in the evening breeze from Dajti. We'd met often before but she'd always been too busy to tell me her story.

'You see I'm not only a politician but a wife and a mother,' she said when I first met her. 'And I can do so much because my husband and children help me. I have four you know. When I think how different my life was when I was their age! When the Italian invasion began I was fourteen.'

'I want to know all about that part of your life.' She demurred, but I was insistent.

'All right,' she said, 'come and see me at my office to-morrow. Now I'm afraid I must take them home,' she said. 'I have to read them a story before they go to sleep and it's already getting late.'

Reluctantly I said good-bye and they went off, the sound of eager voices and laughter floating back to me on the rose-scented air.

Next morning I was on the dot for our appointment. Looking just as attractive amidst all the paraphernalia of a large office Liri waved me to a chair while she discussed some final memos

with her secretary, a man. Then she sank into a chair opposite me, her face grave.

‘Just one thing I want you to remember, though I’m telling you *my* story I speak for all the Albanian women who struggled for their country. There are many who did much more than I. Just remember when I say “I” it means “we”—all those women whose stories haven’t been told and who fought in Occupied Tirana.

‘When the Italians occupied Tirana I was at school. Many girls and women there had strong patriotic views and within eighteen months they began to protest against our Fascist professors. We organized strikes and protestations and even beat a professor who tried to stop us.

‘Partisan bases were formed in the town. An illegal press was set up. The whole population helped us. Even well-known Underground workers were never betrayed.

‘At first my father was very worried about my activities. Then it began to worry him that I and other young girls were fighting for Albania and he was doing nothing. Eventually he gave money and used to let us have meetings in the house. My mother and grandmother gave strong support, and my five smaller brothers were wonderful. They, with other young boys, acted as couriers, as “watch-dogs” when we had meetings, and sabotaged Italian cars by putting nails in to the tyres.

‘I became Secretary of the Youth Organization. Our duty was to persuade all the girls to join in propaganda work. It was wonderful how they rallied. In February 1942, 600 students of the Girls’ Institute held their first demonstration—against the teaching which was not Albanian at all. We shouted: “We do not want Italian professors!” “We do not want the Italian director!” “Down with Fascism!” We demonstrated through the streets of Tirana. As a result many of us were expelled.

‘In September of the same year, when it became known that the Italians were going to deport Albanians to prisons in Italy, girls and women organized a demonstration of protest before

the prison-house here. The Italian militia fired on us and an old woman, Emine Peza, was killed and many women and girls were wounded. The courageous way the mothers and sisters stood before the prison-house gave heart to their sons and brothers who were in prison and made them more resolute in the fight. It also had a lot of influence upon citizens who up till then had "sat on the fence".

'I was arrested but let out after a few hours because there was no room for us in jail !

'In another demonstration at the time of the Italian capitulation I was wounded, and, through neglect, I lost my eye. Today, I can't understand how any young girl could be so careless.

'A strange youth for us ! No real school, no play, no books, no theatres. Only protest, Underground work, fighting with whatever means were at our hands.

'I hope my children will never live through such a time. Yet I would not have missed those great and terrible days. We lived in a state of passionate exaltation. None of us thought it was possible to be killed.

'Old people were afraid it would ruin our morals. Actually, because we were under constant criticism we were more scrupulous in our behaviour. We had to be the best pupils in the class; most careful in our relations with boys; respectful in our attitude to older people, without ever yielding our opinions.

'I worked mainly with women. They helped us wonderfully and many of them began to see in Albania's freedom hope of their own. "Speak, or you will be strangled," the prefect of Tirana said to Ije Farka when the Fascists killed partisans whom Ije had sheltered and furnished with arms. But she remained silent.

'In every way we did our utmost to help the partisans. Women took the wool from their mattresses; girls and brides gave part of their dowry; they knitted thousands of socks, sweaters, shawls and other things. I remember in December

1942 thousands of New Year parcels were prepared for the partisans. One old woman came late at night bringing a pair of socks which she had just finished knitting. That night the wife of a poor workman gave their last lek. He had gained only three leks that day. With one lek she bought the bread, with another kos, the third she gave to the partisans.

'Women all over Albania did the same. From Vlora, Gjino-kaster, Shkoder, Elbasan, and other towns we got news of women demanding the liberation of the country and the release from prison of their sons. In these strikes and demonstrations many women were killed, hundreds wounded. Many were sent to concentration camps abroad; many never returned.

'Everything pushed me, though my family felt it very badly. I was eighteen and instead of teaching when I finished school in November 1942, I joined the partisans.'

She was silent a moment and her eyes looked far away: 'I went from Tirana to Elbasan, and then through the mountains to Korca. After the winter operations of '42, I went to North Albania.'

A smile transformed her face. 'I can really say I've travelled all over Albania on foot.

'We women partisans had a lot of problems to face. Owing to the fanaticisms of all religions in Albania we had to be very strict and correct with the men. Naturally, as we were fighting beside them, we wore men's clothes, but our behaviour had to be beyond criticism in every way.

'In April '44 when I wasn't yet eighteen I became Secretary of the Youth Organisation of Albania. When Liberation came all that had accumulated in our hearts during the war, burst out. But you already know all that.'

A remarkable woman, Liri. An outstanding woman in any company.

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When I went to see Emeni Terezi I was a little in awe of her, since she was the Vice-Minister of Industry, and I felt

that any moment I might be expected to enter into a discussion on production figures.

We talked generalities over the inevitable coffee and it was some time before I managed to switch the conversation to the subject I wanted to talk about : her life as a partisan.

'Between the anti-feminist fanaticism of the peasant men and the propaganda of our invaders and those who collaborated with them, the position was really very, very delicate, but we won. We finally became so popular in the villages that women would say : "Take my girl to fight with you." And indeed, more than half of the six thousand women partisans came from the villages.

'We women had two duties : to fight and to convert the village women so that they would be prepared to help us.

'We did everything possible so that we could not be distinguished from the men. We did the same work, and even though the men tried to look after us and protect us because they didn't want us to fall into enemy hands, we fought beside them. There was one terrible time when Margarita Tulani and her young brother fell into the hands of the Germans. That was down on the coast. They were found dead and shockingly mutilated. But even as partisans we didn't get away from our role of women : we not only participated in the fighting, but we helped to cook and in the evenings to sew when necessary. You could say we did two jobs, just as women do to-day.

'Some of the time we lived in the houses of the peasants, sleeping on the floor as they did. We got used to it. They kept us in food—we ate what they had, mainly corn-bread and kos. If they had better we shared it.

'In spite of the pressure the Nazis put on the peasants I never knew any village where there was a case of betrayal. Mind you, in some places, they would capture a peasant and would force him to lead the way to the partisans' hide-outs. If he didn't go, he was killed. But usually some other peasant found a way to warn us before they arrived to surround us.

The peasants brought us everything. The clothes we wore were either sent to us from the town, or taken from the enemy military depots. The people organized themselves in order to bring us food, ammunition, clothes and medical supplies. That is why we say that the war was the war of the whole Albanian people.

'All kinds of prejudices had to be overcome: the Kanun said that a woman must not carry a rifle. Thus for us to have weapons was an affront to everything that the Unwritten Law stood for. But gradually the peasants said: "Well, they fight like men", and they began to consider us as their equals, without any sense of inferiority. It has happened that when we were attacked, I went in front and the men would say "She is shaming us . . . let us follow her."

'By the time the war was finished we not only had the support of the greater part of the peasants, but we had also broken down a number of the bad old customs such as the vendetta, though even to-day there are families who maintain a kind of bloodless hereditary enmity.

'We took it for granted always that we would win even if the whole German Army should overrun Albania.'

'It must have been a hard life,' I said, thinking of the forbidding mountains under snow, of the rocky mountain passes—of all the conditions that make Albania's mountain regions truly terrifying to those not bred to them.

'It was not easy,' she said, with monumental understatement.

Always the romantic I asked: 'And where did you meet your husband?'

'He also was a partisan with me, though our very rigid rules forbade us to have anything to do with the other sex except as comrades. We were forbidden to love one another—but hearts take no notice of such rules.'

Her face is tender as she speaks of those past years. 'We had our love for a year and a half before the war ended.'

'And now?' I said.

'We've been married a long time and have two sons and a girl. My younger son is four years and goes to kindergarten.'

'And what do you do in your spare time?' I asked with gentle irony.

She laughed. 'Well, I'm just finishing my Fourth-Year Economics Course at the University. You see, we were very young when we went into the partisan army, and most of us have had to finish our education since. Our Government is almost entirely made up of partisans, so in the last fifteen years, we have had not only to build a new country, but to learn how to do it. I am a Vice-Minister of Industry, and I have to work among engineers—therefore, it is necessary for me to learn more from all angles. Before I became Vice-Minister of Industry, I was for five years Director of the Textile Mill at Tirana. It was most valuable experience for me. Before that, I had been Vice-Minister of Health, but when the Textile Mill was built, it was considered that as it was new and most of the workers were girls who had never before worked in industry, it was most important that somebody should go there who would look after them—not only from the technical point of view but from the human point of view.

'Those five years of work were worth fifteen in experience to me. Not only did I learn the technical processes from the Soviet engineers, but I came to learn about life. I saw girls grow up. They came there at fourteen and fifteen—girls whose mothers had worn the veil, girls who came in from villages, women who were peasants. I saw the young ones become women, and marry, and my constant fight when I was there was to see that we had enough nurseries and kindergartens, and I nagged at the Government so much that they really gave us plenty of funds for that purpose.'

'And what about the position of women generally to-day?' I asked.

She lifted a small, delicate hand and shrugged her shoulder. 'There is still much conservatism. It has been very difficult,



but each year makes it easier, as the young girls grow up to know only equality, and as the old people grow more reconciled or more educated. We have not only five hundred years of Turkish oppression of women to wipe out, but the Unwritten Law of the mountains that took for granted the inferiority of women. It isn't easy to get rid of what's been ingrained in the mind for so many centuries. But each year things improve.\*

\*Regulations insist that there should be at least one woman on the controlling organizing committees of the trade unions, the youth organizations and offices of the Party of Labour. There must be a woman on the management of all agricultural co-operatives; and where the majority of the workers are women, then the president or vice-president should be a woman.

## XV

ONE DAY I wandered with my Moslem friend through Tirana's streets and stopped at the 300-year-old mosque of Hadji Etham Bey that stands incongruously in its own pool of quiet at Tirana's busiest cross-roads, the green flames of cypresses repeating the lines of the minaret, slender columns topped by elegant capitals supporting the arched portico enclosed by finely wrought iron, the whole rising to a shallow dome, stone-grey against the sky.

At each side of the steps stand the tombs of the founder and his wife: high, narrow indented tombstones inscribed with Arabic characters rising from the head and foot of the stone sarcophagi; his surmounted by a stone fez, hers by a frilled cap.

The stone is deeply carved with painted flowers and arabesques whose colours have faded over the years.

The portico is covered in fine stylized floral designs inset with quaint scenes of actual places and actual mosques that, in painting, have taken on the unreality of a dream.

In the doorway the bearded hoxha was seated with his legs tucked under him in Turkish fashion, his black robe circled with sash, a white turban wrapping his high black hat. A Moslem rosary of ochre-coloured beads slipped incessantly through the fingers of one hand while he warmed the other at a tiny brazier of charcoal. Beside him a friend wearing a cheleshe, his waist encircled with a scarlet sash, read aloud the daily newspaper, *Zeri Popullit*.

The hoxha graciously waved us to enter.

Within, the sunlight fell through the narrow windows with their intricate wrought-iron and lit the jewel-like colours of the carpets that covered the whole floor, and the stylized designs on the walls.

When we came out again my eyes were dazzled by the beauty of mist-blue Dajti framed in a triptych of arches washed with faded lavender pink.

Months later when the minarets were outlined in electric lights for the month of Ramadhan fasting and prayer, I peeped through the glass door and watched row after row of cheleshes rise and bow to the sound of the hoxha's prayer.

\* \* \*

Bairam, the Moslem Festival at the end of the month of Ramadhan. A public holiday and all Tirana was out in its best. Crowds strolled in the streets. The parks were full. I passed a young couple—she wearing the dress of the peasants of Lac—walking arm in arm. Four girls in the elaborately beautiful dresses of Zerqan, walking with a very modern young woman who told me she worked in the textile mill. Two of their male escorts were in white newly-made tirqs, the other two in ordinary western suits. I met a gipsy friend with her large-eyed baby, both in festal garb. We'd often spoken in the park but this was the first time I'd met her husband, a swarthy, proud young man, handsome enough for Hollywood. A mechanic, she explained proudly. We shook hands, exchanged good wishes.

The usual roars rose and fell from the crowd surrounding the open-air stadium where a boxing competition was being held.

Crowds flocked to the football match.

At evening we walked along Tirana's favourite promenade, above us a sky the colour of lavender and the air full of the scent of orange blossom and acacia. The open-air cafés were crowded and Skanderbeg Square a packed mass listening to

an amateur concert on an outdoor stage, the performers coming from factories and co-operatives and schools.

A group of gipsies had come early and ensconced itself on the steps of one of the ministries. Smiling, they made a place for us. They, too, were in festive array, with white sequined scarves, beneath which their dark skins took on a warm glow.

Whole families, some of the men with the high cheleshes of Tirana, others bareheaded. Grandmothers, mothers, daughters, babies. I met one particular friend with her three daughters. Mother was in a new citjane, with a snowy apron, the three girls in modern dress.

A Moslem Festival, my friend Ramadan commented, with as many women enjoying it as men !

\* \* \*

May 2. Easter Eve!—the second Easter I celebrated that year. At 11.45 I was awakened by a loud ringing of bells from the illuminated belfry of the Orthodox Church surmounted by a large luminous cross. The bells continued their joyous clangour, while in the streets people hurried to midnight mass. A moonless night, the spires of the firs outside the hotel outlined against a sky bright with starshine, and all the night full of bells and bird-calls.

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It was my gipsy friends who persuaded me to visit the huge textile mill. As we approached its pink-washed buildings set in a screen of eucalyptus trees I thought that if the architects had been looking for a site for a holiday hotel they could hardly have found one more charming.

In 1951 the Soviet Union made a gift of the mill and its machines. To-day a town surrounds it, for as the building went up, so, as in all such cases, did blocks of flats for the workers, kindergartens, nurseries and a primary school, *and* the trees and the gardens.

Seventy per cent of the 5,000 workers are women:\* a bewildering variety of young and old: women engineers, women designers, women in citjanes, their grey plaits bobbing from under their shawls or scarves, and thousands of young, modern girls at the looms.

An old woman, hollow-cheeked, worn, poured out her experiences in a spate as she kept an eye on the blankets that were coming from the machine.

Do I know what it has meant for peasant women to come and work here? she demanded, striking her thin chest. First of all—to be a human being! Then to have a lovely flat. For her child to go to a kindergarten. (I try not to show my astonishment—I find that I have misjudged her age by twenty years!) A group of older women gather round shaking their covered heads.

*'Po si! Po si!'* in enthusiastic agreement.

\* In 1964 60 enterprises were under the direction of women, and there were 45 vice-directors.

## XVI

IT WAS early in my stay that the Novelist promised: 'I shall take you to my Elbasan for the Spring Festival. Once it was a pagan festival, now it is a popular fête. You will pick violets and primroses on the hillsides, and irises, too, as the people did back in Illyrian days. *Ah, qu'il est beau, mon Elbasan!*'

I went to Elbasan many times before and after the Spring Festival. Always my heart soared as the car, after innumerable hair-pin bends, came out nearly 3,000 feet up on to Karabe mountain which rises in a giant barrier between Tirana plain and Elbasan Valley where the Shkumbini River—known to antiquity as the Genusus—divides Albania in half—Gegeri and Toskeri.

Only superlatives serve for the Albanian mountains. Even Byron could find no words to describe them, and he never climbed to Karabe, which looks westward over the plains to the sea, and, over three-quarters of the compass, opens up a vista of snow-covered summits rising to Mount Tomorr, dominating them all in magnificence and mythology.

When we passed that way in winter the hillsides were brown with stunted vegetation and the runnels of countless springs frozen white over the rocks. Away to the north-east the ruins of the citadel of Petrela, standing from the days of the Emperor Justinian, overlook the valley from a steep triangular rocky islet. Here lived Mamice, Skanderbeg's sister, who rode and fought by his side till she was killed in battle. Here, too, is

buried a member of the British Military Mission parachuted into Albania after the Italian capitulation.

When I climbed its steep slopes in spring, giant irises waved like a purple veil in the breeze and a young shepherd piled my arms with them. Here in ancient days passed the road which connected north and south, running from an Illyrian city east of Petrela to Dorsit on the coastal side of Mount Karabe's highest point, the ruins of its walls showing an advanced technique, the stones being obviously worked by masons and cemented.

From snowy summits stretching north and south and west, one comes unexpectedly on Elbasan lying in the eternally green valley of the Shkumbini, the hills that surround it glinting metallically with olive-groves.

A garden-city in its circle of snow-covered wooded mountains where orange trees flourish, fruit trees blossom early and roses bloom in January.

On my first visit I wandered through the narrow picturesque streets with the city librarian. 'Once I was a ragged street-boy', he said, 'with no hope of being anything much. But I have studied, I am the Librarian, the Writers' Organization is encouraging me to be a writer. I am finishing the libretto of an operetta about a girl of this region whose parents object to her marriage to the man of her choice.'

He is an impassioned amateur archaeologist: 'Twenty-four hundred years ago the Romans built here the city of Scampa. It was an important stage on the Via Egnatia, as testifies a Latin inscription found in the foundations of the fortress. But the actual town dates from 1466 when the Turks built this fortress as a base for their expeditions against Skanderbeg. In the nineteenth century they destroyed much of it to prevent its being fortified by local insurgents.'

Within the angle formed by its powerful walls and an old watch tower, a part of the city was built, and there also the little museum tracing Elbasan's history from earliest times.

Illyrian weapons, Roman and Greek, Byzantine and Turk; gravestones and pieces of sculpture—relics of a vanished world.

That evening I leant from my hotel window. Minarets and cypresses black against an apricot afterglow and Venus blazing in a turquoise sky.

Somewhere a church bell was ringing. Below, the first bat fluttered from the minaret of a mosque with dome and shadowy colonnade as the hoxha began to call to evening prayer.

Over after-dinner coffee, the librarian and I talked in our imperfect Italian of Australian writers. He had read translations of their books in Russian. Could I perhaps ask if these writers would send one of their books for the English section of his library? Many students are studying English. So here in this town in the centre of Albania I took the names he asked for: I like to think of the library of Elbasan with its section marked 'Australia'.

\* \* \*

When I went to the Spring Festival, young leaves were breaking, heather purpled the hills and flowering almond trees dropped cascades of blossom from every crag. On the very peak of Karabe a woman, dressed in her fête-day best, white and red and black and gold, was silhouetted against the sky, distaff in hand, spinning as her sheep browsed on the steep slopes.

We picked violets and primroses by the roadside and everywhere was the indescribable scent of returning spring.

This time I was accompanied by the Novelist and his charming French-speaking wife—a dark-eyed beauty who during the Occupation had worked in the Underground in Elbasan before joining the partisans when it became too hot for her in the town.

The Novelist brought the country alive with his tales of partisan life and legends much older. He was born in this region, fought in the mountains with the partisans, and since



has traversed it often on horseback and foot as it is his parliamentary electorate.

By the roadside a tiny cemetery. Here were buried peasants of the neighbouring village, shot by the Germans in reprisal for an attack by partisans in which the peasants had played no part.

On the Karabe road were fought the last bitter engagements between partisans and Nazi troops. Across this mountain the German High Command tried to send reinforcements to the garrison surrounded in Tirana. But the partisans swooped down on them from the mountains and wiped them out, thus opening the way to the liberation of the capital.

I spent a fascinating day in these hills watching the shooting of a film on the partisan war—Albania has a flourishing film industry.

Then we followed history. 'The mountains that enclose Elbasan are dotted with the ruins of Illyrian citadels,' the Novelist remarked. 'The villages show traces of the centuries-long resistance they put up against the Turks. Everywhere in this valley are signs of the crypto-Christianity practised by a population which officially declared itself Moslem to escape the impositions of their conquerors but continued in secret to practise their religion—a man would be called Mahurrem outside and Vassili at home.'

'Down this road we shall see a fourteenth-century Orthodox Church and monastery.'

Dilapidated and neglected (it has never recovered from the German attempt to burn it) it still has a tranquil beauty in the midst of fields and trees green with spring, the tinkling of goat-bells breaking the quietness.

Embedded in the walls are tombstones of men who lived millenia before its building. We deciphered 'Parthenus'—a name that goes back to Illyria; the tombstone in Greek of Charles Topia; two Roman figures.

I was presented to Papa Lexis, the old Orthodox priest

dignified in his long black robe and high Orthodox hat. An aquiline face, a long white beard (he was eighty-six), hands so fine they might have served as model for some Byzantine saint. He will live out his life here on a Government pension with several monks and three peasant families who work the monastery land.

In the month of June a pilgrimage is held to seek blessings from the saint whose relic is enclosed, though no one seemed very clear as to who he was or what particular powers his bone possesses.

Papa Lexis gave us his blessing and we left for the Spring Festival.

What spring rites were celebrated in ancient days no one, alas, knows. To-day it is a respectable public holiday with some families picnicking in the fields and folk-dancing on the grass, and more modern Elbasani promenading up and down the main road in correct Sunday-go-to-meeting Western clothes, pointed shoes, high heels and all.

Only once the ancient spirit touched me. At the Novelist's urging, Spiro reluctantly took the car over a road that was unworthy of the term in any language. Here, he assured us, irises, wild violets and primroses grew in an abundance known only on Elysium. But, alas, his youthful dream brought us out on to a hillside in the throes of being transformed into a new residential quarter. We wandered awhile without seeing anything but torn earth, bricks and lime. Then out of the woods above the town three whistling schoolboys came skipping like young satyrs. They carried bunches of velvety wine-brown irises of a type I had never seen and at my cry of delight they poured them in a perfumed stream into my arms.

\* \* \*

Returning in the late afternoon we stopped at a spring on the road above Elbasan to drink the crystal clear icy water. Six students came running to talk with us. Would we please be

photographed? We posed, exchanged names and addresses and weeks later my mail brought me an envelope which contained a snapshot inscribed: 'From Tomorr with much affection.'

\* \* \*

We stopped at a new wood-working factory because our guide had a brother working there. 'Just five minutes,' he said.

I shattered our schedule when I kissed the first three women who swooped enthusiastically on me. They, like many of the others, had cast off the *perché* to go there from the villages in 1955. From then on it was a kind of human conveyor-belt as I was passed from arms to arms.

I can't write much about the factory. It looked up-to-date and efficient to me. But I shall always remember the relay of women in citjanes and white head-scarves who came to press my hands in their cold, work-hardened ones, and call me *Moter* (sister).

That morning the sky was an ineffable blue, everything sparkled: the dew on the grass, the snow on the mountains. Almond trees tossed their clouds of white blossom. The fields of the state farm were green under new crops.

I should like to visit the hot springs of Lixhat, where a sanatorium has been built, and the thirty-eight mountain lakes on the mountains above us, but these joys are for tougher mountaineers than I.

Later I went to see the new oil-refinery at Cerrik, really because the Novelist had told me not to miss the weekly market, as the costumes of the women of the district were particularly beautiful. We met along the road, on horseback, on donkeys and on foot, a procession to send a camera-man crazy. Mere words can't convey the richness and beauty of the women's costumes with their long white tunics finely striped in red and black; the long aprons with parallel broken stripes woven in harmonious colours, the fine muslin scarf falling to the shoulders. Sometimes an older woman on a horse, her face

almost entirely covered, but most of them walking. They walk like goddesses these women—sometimes with a painted cradle on their backs, sometimes holding the hand of a small girl a replica of mother from top to toe.

Centuries of resistance have given to the faces of women as well as men an air of ineradicable pride. Haughtily they eye the stranger, then a smile and a wave brings a flashing smile and the hand to the cheleshe.

‘A proud people,’ the Novelist had said. ‘Reserved, aloof, but once they are your friends they are your friends for ever.’

I am prepared to take it for granted that the new oil-refinery has everything a refinery should have. I certainly spent a lot of time walking round it with my tenacious guide. But, shamelessly, I say that the most memorable moment for me was when I came out and found four gorgeously-clad mountain women leaning on the gateway talking to a girl in overalls and looking at the spreading installations with dark, speculative eyes.

Beautiful as some ancient poem the mountain women moved from stalls to shops in the market while their picturesque husbands smoked with dungaree-clad cousins and brothers from the refinery. And the process of domesticating the eagle went its slow, inexorable way.

## XVII

IT WAS the old lady's hip-length jacket heavily embroidered in black that first attracted me as we stood side by side examining a hand-woven carpet. When she turned I saw that she wore embroidered magenta anklets, giving an elegant line to her citjane.

She was undecided about the carpet which she was considering buying for her granddaughter's wedding. Would she like it or would she prefer new-fangled chairs?

'*Po si, Po si,*' she lamented, shaking her white-veiled head, 'everything's different to-day. When I was young, up in our village in the mountain the plak (the old people) fixed up everything for the young people without ever asking them "by your leave" or "would you prefer someone else?" I'd never seen my husband before the day I married him and here's our girl brings a young man home from the oil-field where she works. I was always against her going there. It's men's work. Why couldn't she work in the textile factory like other nice girls do? Anyway home she comes and says: "We're going to get married next month on May Day in a Registry Office."

"Next month!" I said, "What about your trousseau?" And she said: "Oh, I'll buy what I need." And *he* said: "You can't expect a model-worker to spend her time sewing a trousseau!"

'Not that it isn't long past time she was married—she's quite old, twenty-one next month. Her father and grandfather were killed by the Germans, so I had to pick a young man for her.

But she refused him out of hand. Now when I was young, as soon as the boy and girl were old enough, that is, about twelve, their fathers arranged things. There was always a go-between, and they fixed up the day to get married. They weren't married off so young; this wasn't considered good, though sometimes it happened. But by engaging them young the families could get together to know each other and build up a friendship.'

She sighed. 'It's a pity the old customs are more or less forgotten to-day. Not everything old is bad.' She nodded her head with its two meagre grey plaits hanging under the white veil.

'Not that I believe in a young girl having to marry a man whether she likes him or not, but the marriages were very nice and we had a lot of fun preparing for them, and at the marriage, and for about a week afterwards.

'People generally got married in autumn, or spring, when they were free from work in the field. In my village the date was established according to the phases of the moon, but always on a Sunday or a Thursday, and the ceremonies commenced a week before the day when the wife was taken to the husband. We used to call it the Marriage Week and there were particular rites for every day.

'Ah, if you could only have seen it! It was a lovely time. The last time I saw a proper wedding was in 1950, when my eldest grandson was married. But in my day they were even better.

'We started with a feast at the house of the bride for friends and near relations, and the young married women had the job of preparing the house for the feast. On the fourth day, the announcers went round the village knocking on doors and telling everybody who was expected to come to the wedding.

'The close relations of the family didn't expect invitations. If they got one, they would have been offended. But then there were those who had to be invited with their whole family and who could bring other friends with them. Acquaintances of

the family couldn't bring anybody else. Then there were other guests who were asked simply so that they could make a visit of congratulation to the young people, but they weren't expected to come to the ceremony.

'Dear, dear, dear, how busy we used to be! On the first day we had to get the grain ready and bring down enough food and wood. Then the young women got together to clean the grain and to prepare all the wood that would be necessary to keep the fires going. There were a lovely lot of songs that we sang for that, and toasts were drunk, and at the end all those who had helped had a feast.

'Then in the afternoon we used to take the store of grain to the mill. The men who drove the mules had to be given raki to drink on the way. It was custom for them to take first place at the mill. Nobody would ever dream of trying to go before a wedding party, because that would have been a terrible thing.

'On the fifth day—you could call it the day of preparing the necessary dishes and such things for the feast. First of all, it was arranged where the distant friends would be housed, the stables for their mounts (sometimes there would be fifty or sixty horses and mules from different places), then everybody who had been invited would indicate the number of plates and cups they could lend for the feast. No one, even if they weren't invited, refused to lend plates on such an occasion, and on this day, special bread called 'cyrake' was prepared, and if the dough rose well it was considered a good sign that the wedding would be fertile.

'In the afternoon, the guests would begin to arrive. When near the house, they would announce their arrival by shooting off their guns. They would bring with them two or three sheep, according to the number of people, and four or five large loaves of bread.

'Then they had to prepare the group who would take the bride back to her husband's family. The choice usually fell on a fairly old member of the family of the bride's mother—

called a "selamaz". He had to be a wise man because quite a number of things could go wrong. Sometimes trouble has been known to arise at wedding ceremonies, because the man chosen for this wasn't capable of looking after things, and once a whole wedding-party was shot.

'Then there was a substitute for the bridegroom who had to take the latter's place in a number of ceremonies. From there on the whole control of the wedding ceremony was in the hands of the selamaz.

'In my village it used to be so beautiful. There were songs and dances, and the men used to show off how clever they were with their guns and in fact, everyone tried to show his best. The only person who wasn't there was the bridegroom: he used to hide himself in the stable and the granaries, and pretend that he wasn't the slightest bit interested in what was going on.

'Then at mid-day, we prepared the tables—one for the men and another for the women. In the evening, the guests used to "put up" in the house in the village which had been arranged beforehand.

'Then on the seventh day came the marriage. The men began talking and eating very early. The wedding breakfast was eaten about ten o'clock in the morning so that there would be plenty of time for the ceremony in the afternoon. After coffee was drunk, a seat would be brought into the middle of the courtyard where the young bridegroom would have to sit, and then the women would take wool that they had just spun into the centre of the court, singing an old song without which the marriage couldn't go on—it was called: "Wool and linen".

'Then we dressed the bride. Many a time I've helped to dress a bride. Girls to-day aren't as pretty as they used to be. Then presents were given to the escorts.

'The bride was expected to put up a show of not wanting to go and there were all kinds of ceremonies associated with that, but finally, we put on her a thick red veil which covered her face and came down to her shoulders.



‘In the meantime the escort of the young bridegroom got their horses ready, the young men took the horse on which the bride would leave. Then she was taken into the courtyard and got on to her horse—all polished up and wearing special harness, all very, very handsome, and the substitute for the husband took a handful of rice and several coins and threw them on her, at the same time firing a shot from his pistol to warn the escort that it was time to set out. The father took a sheep, killed it before the horse of the young bride, and they left. Behind the bridegroom came the Master of Ceremonies.

‘The bridal procession never went back to the bridegroom’s house by the route by which it had come; it wasn’t considered to be good luck.

‘Once they got inside the bridegroom’s village, they fired off a pistol shot to warn them that the procession was coming. Everybody in the house—guests and family and everybody else who went—came out into the courtyard to welcome the bride.

‘Everybody breathed a sigh of relief when the escorts finally got back with the young woman, because all kinds of things could happen on the way—the men would get a bit out of hand. Near the village where I lived there was a place called Tomb of the Marriage Escorts where the escort of both sides were buried because two of them had a quarrel over which one should give way on the road.

‘It was a beautiful sight to see the young bride on her horse in her marriage costume with her red veil. They took her into the courtyard and the father of the bridegroom came out to welcome her. Then the women of the house embraced her and they gave her a crust of bread to break with her hands and distribute to the children. Then she was taken into the room of the women and left in their company.

‘Many a girl’s heart beat fast at that time I can tell you. There she sat waiting for her husband to come in—probably she’d never seen him in her life; certainly in my young day she never did, and after a while the young man came in and

took off the veil with the aid of his sword or of a gun, and we used to say that this meant he was saying to her: "I'm giving you your liberty but be careful how you make use of it."

"Then we sang the marriage songs about the charm and beauty of the new bride. There's no bride to-day looked as beautiful as they used to look then. In the evening, came the ceremony of closing up the couple. The women took the bride into the room that was to be hers; the men the same with the bridegroom. The hoxha recited a prayer after that.

"The ritual songs were sung and guns fired. In one corner of the room the young bride stood upright. The young man took a handkerchief and wiped the make-up off the face and after that she washed her face. Then the young couple sat down near the hearth and the young wife offered the husband a cigarette and a glass of raki. Then the young man went quickly out of the room, it being considered a shame for him to linger there. All night songs and feasting went on.

"When they eventually went to bed, which was ready for them in the centre of the room, they had to leave under their pillows a present for those who prepared the bed. The following day, they made their visits which went on for several days. Then after three days, the young bride had to go to the kitchen and prepare a cake. Then there was a little feast for the friends."

She sighed looking back into the past. "Ah, well, it was a great day in a girl's life. I'll never forget mine and I know many other women who will never forget theirs."

"After that, little by little, you became just a member of the household and you had your work to do and much harder work it was than any of these model workers do to-day! And then you had your children to bring up—no nurseries and kindergartens to help. Yes, indeed, the marriage ceremonies were very fine, but it was a hard life for women. Though their marriage may be made at the Registry Office I think my granddaughter will have an easier time than we had."

## XVIII

WE FOLLOWED the Via Egnatia all day from Elbasan, coming out on a late February afternoon on the Peak of Thane to look down on Lake Oher lying like a giant's mirror 2,000 feet above the sea. The cliché is all too true, because the 7,000 feet high mountains of Yugoslavia which rise from its opposite shore were reflected in every detail from snow-covered summits to villages nestling at their feet. As we swung round the numerous curves in our descent we had breathtaking glimpses, now of the mountains, now of the water. When finally we reached the lakeside, we saw the lake as a colourless sequin-splashed glow through golden reeds growing high in the shallow waters. On the cliffs between road and lake, the picturesque fisher village of Lin clusters, its curious stone houses built right against the rock. Farms surrounded by vineyards nestle on the slopes. Conical fodder stacks built in lopped willows standing some six feet from the ground, are like some fantastic scene out of a fairy-tale.

By the roadside we came on a picturesque Greek church white against the vivid green. Spiro got out with an apology, hurried over to a small roadside shrine, opened the door, drew back two faded pink silk curtains, lit a candle and placed a banknote beside it. Seeing my curiosity, he asked the Professeur to explain that I mustn't take it that he has the habit of lighting candles and putting money in wayside shrines—he's much too

modern for that—but somebody in Tirana had asked him to do it.

Stretching along the lake-shore, Pogradec is a relatively young village for Albania, founded only in the eighteenth century and then purely as an administrative centre for the Turks.

Due to its strategic position, dominating the principal road linking the coast with Central Albania and Macedonia, it has had a career that reveals all the vicissitudes of Albania's troubled past.

During the First World War, it found itself on the front between the French armies on the one part, the Austro-Hungarian and the Bulgarian on the other. It often changed hands and suffered much damage.

During the Italian-Greek struggle of 1940/41, it was burned.

In the square is a monument to eleven victims of the Nazis who were killed on that spot.

In this region, as everywhere on the road from Tirana, the partisans incessantly ambushed enemy columns, Italians first and Germans later. Towards the end of the war, the city was finally liberated by partisan units. Once more Pogradec was seriously damaged. It is not strange that it should appear a new town, the few houses that survived showing marks of shrapnel and damage from fire.

Last century the peasants who lived in these regions found that fishing, agriculture and sheep grazing could not provide sufficient for them and their families, and they began to emigrate in large numbers to Greece, Turkey, Bulgaria and Roumania. The men who were left became master-carpenters, and particularly stonemasons, for which they were renowned, going often far afield from their native village to other towns where work was offering.

Now the plateau of Pogradec is prosperous and work abundant. There are blocks of flats, hotel and holiday rest homes along the lake shore. They told me Pogradec looks

forward to a bright future as the most popular tourist zone in Albania, with a fine beach stretching around the shore of the lake, the waters so clear that the bottom can be seen sixty feet down.

I watched the lake turn silver under the sunset, while the mountains flushed purple and rose. Reality and reflection formed a glorious sight, snow ridges cutting the ice blue sky and all reflected in still waters.

At the little old-fashioned hotel I ate delicious fish from the lake, with the sound of its waters lapping gently on the shore and my table drawn as close as possible to the big stove in the centre of the room, because with the sinking of the sun it had become bitterly cold.

Lake and mountains had now taken on an unearthly beauty under the moon, the water glittering as though scattered with quicksilver, and the mountains ghostly and unsubstantial.

That evening I learned from the local archaeologist that in various little villages around the remains of Illyrian cities have been found, and some inscriptions in an ancient temple show that there had once been a shrine consecrated to Esculapius, the God of Medicine.

From him I learned of one of the most amazing finds of Illyrian civilization. In May 1918, during the Bulgarian occupation, seven tombs were found in what was clearly an Illyrian burial place, near Trebineste on the opposite shore—now part of Yugoslavia.

Between 1930 to 1933, the Yugoslavs made even more remarkable discoveries, now in the museum at Belgrade, said to belong to the second half of the fifth century B.C., which are clearly linked with the Mycenaean culture of 2000 B.C.

All are of highly-developed craftsmanship, gold ear-rings set with pearls and pendants of a similar design. Hairpins, silver bracelets ending in serpents' heads, rings and finely-wrought silver drinking-horns belonging to a still older age; bronze rings, bracelets and candelabra; glass that must have come

from Egypt, amber from the Baltic; Grecian pottery; strangest of all, a pair of gold sandals, clearly importations; treasures from all the then known world.

By the time I went to bed, a wind had risen that rattled my windows and set me huddling under the pile of blankets, in spite of a radiator that the little plump maid brought me with clucking, sympathetic sounds. Outside the Canadian poplars lashed in the wind and I finally slept to the thud of waves that sounded as heavy as combers on Bondi Beach. I woke to a real surf breaking on the shore, a cloudy sky and the crying of gulls two thousand feet above the sea.

I left with two smacking kisses from the maid and a promise to come back in the summer.

## XIX

FROM POGRADEC the road sweeps in wide curves up the mountainside which leads to the plateau of Korca. At each sweep in the road, the lake is seen lying below in the basin of hills, its surface like crinkled tinfoil under the wind, beyond it the mountains of Yugoslavia stretching till they are lost in cloud.

All the peasants we passed coming down the mountainside had their heads swathed in scarves, cheleshes down to their ears and only the eyes visible, with red or yellow kerchiefs covering the whole of the face against the wind.

The land is so arid that it seems suitable only for the goats who leap with agility from rock to rock. One wonders what the sheep graze on! But new villages are being built, new lands ploughed and a mine opened up.

We came at last on the snow-covered plateau of Korca, dazzling in the morning light, roughly two thousand five hundred feet above sea level, and stretching away to a rampart of snow-clad mountains. There we stopped to ask our way from a craggy-faced old peasant who was happy to gossip with foreigners—a term that here covers Tiranans as well as Australians.

'Until the Liberation the whole plateau belonged entirely to the beys,' he told us. 'In the old days this village was surrounded by a large wall. Inside the walls the bey owned everything. No peasant could build even a rough hut outside the

walls unless he agreed that it should belong to the bey. Any peasant putting up a hut had to put his thumb-mark to a paper. In those days hardly any of us could write our names. To-day we keep only the walls as a memorial of the past.'

Practically all the houses are new. They are single-storeyed brick houses, with wide windows. He waved a gnarled hand over the vast plain :

'On all the hillsides we're planting vineyards so that in the future, this plateau will become one of the principal vine-growing places in Albania.

'If you look at an old map you'll see that all this was called the Marshes of Maliq. Not only were we poor but in winter the villages used to be flooded when the lake overflowed, and in the summer they were infested with malarial mosquitoes.

'Maliq Bey owned the whole of the area of Maliq and he sold the various rights in the lake for fishing and game hunting. He would lend money to us peasants at interest of 20 per cent, so that we never had a chance of getting out of debt. That's how I lived and my father lived and my grandfather lived before him.

'The draining of the marshes showed us a lot of things we never knew about. You wouldn't believe how long people have lived here. We found all sorts of objects from the Neolithic age onward—Neolithic!' He repeated the word proudly. 'Tools made of horn, pottery vases, decorations for clothes, fishing hooks, tools of all kinds.

'We have the best apples in Albania,' he said as we left, in proof of which he pressed into my hands two which certainly lived up to his boast.

\* \* \*

The sun glistened on snow-covered fields and lay thick on roof-tops on the school, the Culture House, and innumerable new brick dwellings of the Bulgarec Agricultural Co-operative that now flourishes on former swamp land.



The Director—cap pulled well down, high rubber boots, welcomed us. Three rosy-cheeked girls accompanying him kissed me warmly—and so did a handsome young peasant with an authoritative air.

With Angi and Iole, Vini and the young man conveying me, I picked my way through mud and over puddles.

The Director laughed, remarking: 'Not so long ago you'd have had to swim. In the winter, we needed boats to get about at all. Where your car passed to-day, ten years ago we fished.

'During Zogu's time many of the peasants from this region migrated because they couldn't stand Maliq Bey's oppression any more. In addition to having to pay him a third of what the land produced, every Saturday we had to take him gifts of eggs, chickens and honey, though we never ate anything but corn bread and kos ourselves. As well as that we had all the national taxes, including a poll-tax. There was only one school for every four or five villages, and only children of the rich peasants could go to it. In spite of that, we peasants had to pay a school tax. Maliq Bey and the three lesser beys in the area had a contract between them which set out: "Those are your peasants, those are mine," and no peasant who got into trouble with his bey had a hope of living in the district. They did not even stop short of murder—for instance, the son of Maliq Bey was a killer; he killed three people during the Zogu regime, including a doctor in Korca whom he killed with a knife. Absolutely nothing was done by the Government in Tirana or the local police to bring him to justice.' He screwed up his eyes. 'During the war they collaborated with the Germans.'

The young man broke in: 'Thirty of our villagers—men and women—joined the partisans. Five were killed.'

The Director nodded slowly. 'Yes, this was a partisan base. You couldn't have found a peasant in the whole region who would have betrayed them for any money.

'When we got rid of the Italians and the Nazis and the

feudal beys we started draining the swamp. It was a tremendous business. In Zogu's time French and German experts said it couldn't be done. Soviet engineers taught us how to do it. It took two and a half years. In places, the land had to be emptied to a depth of thirty feet. We drained 14,000 acres of actual swamp land, and improved another twenty-four thousand as a result of the drainage. It gave us a new life with new land to be ploughed with new tractors and set with sugar-beet. Agricultural and stock experts come and advise us, and our people go away to conferences and colleges. I'm kept busy,' the Director shakes his head from side to side in the Albanian affirmative.

'He's a Member of Parliament, too,' Iole whispers loudly.

'But you must see the village,' the young man broke in. 'We've built new roads. We've had electricity since 1953. Over eighty families have built new houses—this year twelve were built and more are planned for next year.'

After drinking liqueur, and coffee, eating llokum, visiting the library and seeing the Culture House, I was borne off to the sheep-shed to give an Australian opinion.

Then with Iole, Vini and Angi towing me I ran—actually ran—to the cowshed which was their particular province. The man in charge—burly, red-faced and wearing a faded Wehrmacht tunic over his breeches—presented the complete pedigree of each cow and calf. The girls chattered and cooed over their particular charges and showed themselves efficient and well-informed.

'They are brigade-leaders,' the Director said proudly.

I congratulated them but the handsome young man stopped me.

'That's not enough. They ought to be on the Committee of Management.'

The Director tilted his cap over his eyes and scratched the back of his head.

'I *know* they should,' he said in a tone of exasperation. 'But

what are we to do if the men won't vote for them?' He turned to me apologetically : 'There's still some fanaticism here.'

'It's a disgrace,' the young man flushed. 'Fifteen years after Liberation and we still talk about fanaticism ! I'll bring it up at the next co-op meeting again.'

'Do you want to be on the Committee?' I inquired cautiously of the three girls. They all talked at once in an indistinguishable medley of information and indignation.

'*Po si, Po si,*' the Director shook his head. 'I agree.'

'He's a good man,' the girls smiled at him. 'He does everything he can to help us but there are a lot of horrible old men who have learnt nothing since Liberation except how to vote "No" each time they see a woman's name.'

'Come back in another year or so,' the young man urged; 'things will be different then !'

*Note.* Much progress was made in the next four years. In 1964 13 women were presidents of agricultural co-operatives and 195 were vice-presidents.

## XX

KORCA WAS picturesque with its streets under six inches of snow, snow covering its roofs, domes and minarets, and powdery snow still falling.

In the comfortable little hotel, the waiter hurried to pile up the fire and as the fire reached the stage to warm a manorial hall, I began to shed fur gloves and fur coat and sheepskin-lined boots and got down to my Chinese silk-padded jacket which I wore above several woollen sweaters. Over an excellent lunch of thick soup, beef and the largest dried beans that I have ever seen, topped with delicious kos, I found myself in the familiar discussion as to why do we not milk sheep in Australia.

Snow or not, next day we toured the city under the guidance of a French-speaking writer who was collecting material for a book on his native city.

It is difficult to reconstruct the town as it was in the past, so peacefully did it lie under its covering of snow, its streets so clean and placid, its people so up-to-date and modern. Of all the towns I visited, Korca immediately gave the impression of being the most modern. All the time I was there I did not see any costume except the ordinary clothes of any community in the West.

It is a new town by Albanian standards, dating only from the sixteenth century, when a Turkish feudal lord, native of the region, was given it as his feudal domain. He built a

mosque which still stands, baths and other institutions to try to attract a population.

It wasn't until the nineteenth century that Korca reached the height of its power and prosperity, but rich as its feudal lords were, the people in the main were poverty-stricken. Many of them went to Egypt, Roumania, and later to America and Australia. Emigration was at the same time the salvation and the curse of the Korcari. Just below my hotel is a place they call 'The Place of Tears' where a monument is being erected, in memory of the tragic days when mothers and sisters accompanied their fathers and their brothers as far as this spot and watched them go along the road which took them to foreign countries from which most never returned.

A road that crosses the Gramos Mountains links Korca to Greece. This region has always been famous for its struggles against invaders, the last the Nazis, who, in 1943, massacred the people of whole villages: men, women and children.

Sterio Spasse, whom I had met in China, one of Albania's leading novelists, himself the son of a peasant, related how they lived in his village. 'Terrible things happened there. In 1931, peasants of a neighbouring village were driven by the men of Maliq Bey from their homes, from their lands. As a young village schoolteacher, I saw the poverty, the misery, and the ignorance of our peasants, 90 per cent of whom were illiterate. If you could have known the peasants of Albania in those feudal days, debt piling on debt, Moslem fatalism deeply ingrained in them! They were destined to work and suffer, the beys were destined to be rich oppressors. What use to struggle against it? It was Fate and you could do nothing against Fate.'

Professor Luarasi told me that the Turkish Government and the Greek Church prohibited the teaching of Albanian. In 1879 a Special Commission approved a common Latin alphabet, which served as the starting-point for the National Movement, led by Sami and Naim Trasher. In 1887 the first Albanian

National School was opened in Korca, its first teachers Pandeli Sotiri and Petro Nini Luaresi. The school remained open until 1902 in spite of the opposition of the Turks. Indeed, many schools were opened in the region for the teaching of the national language in spite of persecution by the Turkish Government. Several of those who fought for the right to teach Albanian were murdered.

For hours we followed the city's history with the Director of what I consider is the finest little museum of its kind in the whole of Albania, reconstructing Korca's history from Neolithic times to the present day.

'Korca was one of the main centres of Albania's National Movement,' the Director explained, 'probably because so many of its men emigrated and came into contact with democratic ideas in other countries which they in turn brought back.

'Here', he pointed to a photograph, 'is the great demonstration in the streets of Korca against the Italian invasion in 1939, and prisoners being taken to gaol; here's a picture of a battalion of partisans; here two young revolutionaries hanged; a demonstration against the Fascists in September 1943: fifty-seven women were killed in it. As everywhere else, very many young women and old women took part in the Resistance struggle in Korca. But there's no monument to them and very little recognition given in any museum in the whole country, nor in our literature either, to the part played by women. People are always saying something should be done about it. But it never is and time goes on, people die, records are lost, stories forgotten.'

It was snowing when we went out, the night dark and bitter. I could think of nothing better than a seat by a roaring fire, but the Director said: 'I have arranged tickets for a play tonight. Would you like to come? If you don't see it now you won't have an opportunity because this is the last night. It's an early performance.'

Politeness and interest won—I said 'Yes.'

We sat in a box while three or four rows of people huddled together in the stalls. My escort explained that usually the theatre is so crowded that you have to book your seats well in advance, but on a night like this, Korcari prefer to stay at home in front of their fires.

One thing of which we could be certain, anyone who went to the theatre on a night like this in an unheated hall, was an enthusiast. I gritted my teeth, wriggled my freezing toes, and pressed my fur gloves deeper into the sleeves of my heavy fur coat, whilst the Professeur shivered on one side and Spiro (a southerner) on the other side had loud and violent tremors, muttering incessantly, '*Ftohet, ftohet*' (cold).

Korca's new theatre is an attractive dual-purpose building where theatre and cinema alternate. In a population of about thirty thousand, three nights are given to plays and four to cinema. The Theatrical Group has an impressive repertoire: In addition to many Albanian plays, it plays Ben Johnson's *Volpone*, Molière's *Malade Imaginaire*, and other classics.

It was an interesting play, well played. The author, a young army officer from Vlora. It was his first work.

When, frozen to the bone, we went out at last, Korca was like a conventional Christmas card—streets covered with immaculate snow, for evidently everybody except us had stayed home. Even the cafés were deserted.

Over late dinner I thawed out to the point of beginning to scorch, so anxious was the waiter that I should be warm. An excellent dinner. Indeed, the little hotel at Korca provided the best food that I met travelling through the whole country.

A man came to tell me that he had come back from Australia where he had been for twelve years. During the war period he fought against the Japanese with the R.A.A.F. in Borneo. It was odd to hear him say: 'My word it was tough-going in the old days'; and when he said: 'And how's Dame Mary Gilmore now? She's a bonzer poet, she is,' I felt that Korca and I really belonged. Alas, he left before I got his

name, so Dame Mary's admirer in Albania must remain for ever anonymous.

I went to bed thoroughly warmed and comfortable, my room heated by a radiator that the maid had turned on for me. Outside the window the snow had piled high on the window-sill. An almond tree showed bare branches, black between the falling flakes, and the hill that rises high behind the town was faintly luminous in the reflection of the hidden moon.

Next morning, the snow had stopped and the plains stretched white to the foot of the Morava Mountains, rising in snow-covered rampart against a sky of a Della Robbia blue. Our road wound between unblemished white fields.

The very young history teacher from the Middle School told us that what is now the village of Mborje was once the Greek city of Emporion—an important trading centre. The ruins of ten-foot-thick walls on the hillside mark its strong citadel.

We stopped at the little rocky village tucked at the foot of the mountains where snow lay like frosted icing on the stone walls. A tiny Orthodox Church, the Church of the Ascension, in form and proportion a perfect example of Byzantine architecture, was oddly moving in the untrodden white churchyard, with the morning sun throwing the shadow of its Greek Cross on the snow.

'It was thought to belong to the thirteenth century, but a Soviet archaeologist who came to visit it last year, thinks it much earlier—probably of the ninth century. There is a still smaller church up there which is obviously older than this.' The teacher pointed to the apparently inaccessible mountain-tops. 'Both clearly were built as private chapels.'

A little old woman came to open it for us and we went through a low doorway into a stone-flagged entry with an ancient wooden-raftered roof. The tiny church was not more than thirty feet by fifteen.

Within the transept, it was so dark that it was difficult to



distinguish anything clearly except the rough stone floor and small wooden seats. It was austere by any standard, interesting only for its age.

\* \* \*

I was introduced to a frail old lady in deepest black, Efigenia Pendavini, who told me in a quiet voice how she had gone to the Girls School of Servasti Qiriaz, a remarkable woman who opened the first Albanian School in 1891 against much opposition.

'People used to call us faithless and throw stones at us, but we never gave up. That school worked hard to unveil women. We used to put on plays—with girls playing boys' roles. I remember particularly *The Merchant of Venice* and *William Tell*. Oh, what a lot of trouble there was about that! The Pasha's wife said it was subversive.'

She was silent, as though for her history had ceased a long time ago.

A young woman broke in: 'She does not tell you that during the war she was an Underground worker here in Korca.'

A faint flush touched Efigenia's withered cheeks. She nodded as if to discount all that, then looked at me with bright eyes:

'Two of my children were killed as partisans but I have still a daughter, a teacher, and a son, a judge. And I myself shall never stop working for women. Unfortunately the old ideas die hard.'

\* \* \*

All over Albania I visited the 'Pioneer Palaces' where children between eight and sixteen spent their leisure hours in an astonishing variety of occupations. The most luxurious was at Tirana; another in a lovely old Venetian house in Shkoder with a well-kept walled garden.

Peskopi, Gjinokaster, Elbasan, Durrës, Berat; and every smaller town provides in the same way for the after-school activities of their growing citizens.

In Korca, the Pioneers occupy a three-storeyed building

without any particular charm of its own while they wait for their own palace to be built. The proudest thing that any child can display is the pioneer's scarf, for a pioneer must qualify by achievements both at school and out of school. The organization trains a child for all the things that the school does not provide, and most homes cannot. Children take up any hobbies to which they are attracted: music, dancing, drawing, singing, drama, woodwork, pottery, radio, physics, chemistry, football, basketball, acrobatics, athletics, fencing.

The Director, an up-to-date, vigorous woman, told me that twelve hundred pioneers came each week to the Palace. I saw the excellently equipped rooms and met the three instructors and directors who are on the permanent staff and some of the twenty-five teachers who take special classes.

The cooking class includes a thorough course in dietetics and home hygiene. Girls in neat aprons and caps served us cocoa with as much grace as a society hostess, and Director and visitors sat with the cooks around the table and nibbled home-made biscuits.

Large and small boys were busy in the well-equipped wood-working rooms and we examined the objects they had made under expert tuition.

In the music room, three small boys from nine to twelve were practising the violin; the teacher was absent and they solemnly played over their scales for us, and one of them played the first tune that he has learned.

In the adjoining room an eleven-year-old girl played the piano for us, the young teacher nervously counting time and the rest of the class sitting rigid in fear of a breakdown which would shame them all. A collective sigh of relief went up when the performance ended.

In the dancing room a group of thirteen- and fourteen-year-olds were practising a local folk dance with tremendous enthusiasm, and it was interesting to see that there was absolutely no embarrassment about girls or boys as they moved

hand-in-hand, or sometimes with their arms around each other. A thirteen-year-old boy sang a Korcan song with a chorus of girls.

As cooks and potters and woodworkers and musicians and embroiderers and dancers and singers crowded to say 'Good-bye' I asked the Director: 'Do you have any problems of juvenile delinquency in Korca?' The term had to be repeated and carefully translated. She laughed. 'Oh, no! Everybody's too busy!'

\* \* \*

At dinner each evening, three or four musicians came and played and sang, mostly Albanian songs, particularly those of Korca.

One night half a dozen men who were enjoying a drink and a song at another table, after some little discussion sent the waiter over with an invitation for us to join them at their table. As we sat down they introduced themselves—three workers from the Korca brewery, two from the Automobile Repair Plant, an electricity-mechanic.

The largest of them, a man with powerful shoulders and a cheerful face thumped his broad chest. 'Our fathers fought against the Turks and we fought against the feudal landowners, the Italians and Nazis. Now let us drink for Peace.' We drank.

A mild little man came and introduced himself in English as one of the Professeur's ex-pupils. 'Do you mind if my wife and I join you?' he asked.

They joined us. She, tiny, round, with the rosiest cheeks I have seen on a women, and radiating happiness. He added unnecessarily: 'She is in pregnancy. This will be our fifth child. I think it's a good idea for a husband to take his wife out when she is in pregnancy, because otherwise she gets dull alone at the house.'

I cheered such excellent sentiments and congratulated her on her husband. We drank to them and the imminent baby.

The orchestra struck up and my table companion started

spontaneously to sing a love song, and our new friend translated for me. 'It is a song of two lovers, who must separate. He, poor boy, is going to emigrate. He sings: "I will never forget your love . . . I don't know if I shall return . . ." and she sings to him: "Even if you do not, you will always be in my heart."' He exchanged fond glances with his wife.

The orchestra struck up my favourite 'Perendesh e Bukuris', the Goddess of Beauty. It was sung with all the romantic charm it requires, helped by the fact that by then the beer and the good red wine of the district was beginning to make them all a little sentimental. When it was finished, we said our good-nights, and they signed their names in my notebook. I am trying to decipher them now. Alas! some of that good beer was splashed on one side of the page and all I can read is Arnest, Vaska, Petro, Teudor, Nicole.

If I had a glass I would raise it to them.

\* \* \*

On my last day in Korca I visited the first sugar refinery built in the country. The chemical engineer, trained in the Soviet Union, greeted me. Pretty, with a white cap on her dark curls, and a smile that would charm hearts anywhere. Two other young women were with her—one of them presented as having received special recognition as a good worker. The Director and staff welcomed me over a liqueur prepared in the refinery (it burnt my stomach and tasted faintly of sugar).

A huge and delicious cake arrived which the chemical engineer cut into slices that I felt incapable of managing. However, encouraged by all present, I made my way through it. The Director began to tell me—everybody else joining in as they grow more and more enthusiastic—that the refinery was a gift from the Soviet Union.

Its establishment was part of the campaign for the development of the Maliq swamp region.

I walked through the new village with its up-to-date apartment houses, nursery, kindergarten and school surrounded by innumerable newly-planted trees and ended up in the Cultural Club where the Club Director proudly showed me the cinema with four hundred places, which also serves for theatrical performances, the library, play-room with a ping-pong table, a room where children can be left while mothers go off to the pictures or engage in other activities in the Club.

One of the rooms was completely given up to illustrations and exhibits of the technology of sugar-making, so that every man or woman in the factory knew all the processes and problems concerned with the work he or she was doing.

Familiar sounds came from behind a closed door, and when we opened it, here with a choir was a young engineer I had met, spending his lunch hour with the refinery orchestra. Twenty workers in overalls and he was conducting them with as much passion as if it were the Philharmonic.

\* \* \*

We set out for the Palace of Culture on a crisp frosty night, with the full moon flood-lighting the snow-covered mountains and snow still piled in the streets, though none had fallen that day. Although we were not expected, the Director welcomed us warmly, explaining that we would have to wait about half an hour if we wanted to hear the choir, but if we liked to sit in his office he would tell me something about their work generally. We toasted each other over a cognac before drinking a café turq, while he told me that the fine building which was now dedicated to culture was formerly the municipal headquarters.

'It has about 600 adult members,' he said. 'We have only 6 on the permanent staff, but we have many enthusiastic helpers. There are 13 different courses—all the arts and some of the sciences. The choir concentrates on the characteristic songs of Korca, and it is made up in the main of older people. Before

the Liberation national songs were discouraged. When the Palace of Culture was established, some of the older men decided it was time we revived them. The group has become so well known that its recordings are heard all over Albania.'

A medley of sounds from guitars and mandolins, lahutas and cheftelis was emerging from the Music Room.

The choir was composed of men of all crafts—an engineer from the sugar refinery, shoemakers, tailors, all interested in preserving their national heritage. The oldest was seventy-five and most of them were beginning to show that they were no longer young.

The conductor lifted his baton and they began, 'Perendesh e Bukuris,' voices perfectly balanced, and a pleasing accompaniment of wind instruments. It was clear that the choir was a group of amateurs in its truest sense, cherishing each melody, loving each note. When they sang 'Summer has come Again,' one forgot that snow was lying thick against the windows, for here in the melody and accompaniment was all the poetry of summer breaking on a Northern land.

Then they sang a patriotic song, 'For the Motherland', written in 1906, when Albania was struggling to throw off Turkish domination. Two of these men had sung it in their youth, when to sing it was to court death. For many of them when they were young it was an inspiration to struggle for a free Albania. They sang with passion: 'Come, oh ye men to the mountains, crying for death or liberty, for nothing is sweeter in this world than when an Albanian dies for Albania.' When the music died away the conductor smiled at me. 'Now we'll give you a song that tells you how we *live* for Albania.'

## XXI

IT WAS a Sunday in spring when we set out from Tirana to Fieri to see the Folklorique Festival. Something was wrong with the car so off I went in a gaz (Russian equivalent of a jeep). After wartime experience of jeeps I was astonished when I stepped in and found myself confronted with well-sprung seats, upholstered in blue and fawn moquette, with the mica windows inset in the side screens covered with white curtains tied with blue ribbons!

We decide this time to take the back road to Durres, by which I had never travelled, Spiro having insisted that it was not fit for a car. It crosses the Lana stream, wends its way into the hills and goes down in a break in the land that descends towards the coast. The grass is a green carpet that rims the rounded foothills beyond which rise the high mountains to the south.

Peasants hopefully thumb a lift as they see a gaz approaching and I regret that there isn't room to pick some of them up. We pass a woman with a new cradle covered with a brilliantly coloured cloth balanced on her head—probably a present from the mother and father of the bride on the birth of her first child. They would give not only the cradle, but baby clothes, the Professeur explains. Apparently they are going off to the equivalent of a Western christening party, because another member of the family balances on her head a large flat plate

with one of the Turkish sweet cakes that it is correct for the bride's family to present on this happy occasion.

We pass a young couple walking and laughing together—a bride with her highly-rouged cheeks and bright lipstick under a black satin chachaf, and a black satin skirt falling to her ankles.

At the roadside are the rusted ruins of bridges; they were all destroyed by the retreating Nazis and new ones have since been built. Away in the hills, three hours on foot, is the village of Peza, an important partisan headquarters where was held one of the most important conferences. Later, the Germans made their way through the hills to it and it was burned to the ground. On the hills that run along each side of the road are ruins of ancient Illyrian fortresses.

The undulating hills decline slowly and gently to the coast, peaceful and clearly prosperous.

\* \* \*

This time we had added to the party a young writer-poet. Albanian born, his father had fled from Korca to Sophia before the War and he had spent the later years of his life in Bulgaria. As he (the poet) had been educated in the French School in Korca I could benefit from his knowledge of the country without an interpreter. In addition he seemed to know every song that had ever been sung in Albania and there's a great variety of them. As we sped through the bright morning air, he and Spiro sang, with the rest of us providing a more or less unmusical accompaniment.

Albanians sing as naturally as birds and I had heard an amazing variety of songs from all over the country. But this was the first time I listened to them with a commentary on their regional origins and musical differences. The first folk-specialist who, tape-recorder in hand, discovers Albanian folk-music is going to astound the folklorique world.

First our duo gave us 'Lulet Bora'—Snow Flower—a



Shkoder song about a lover who goes searching for a flower in the snow and finds it at last in Shkoder . . . a pretty girl.

Albanian songs, like those of so many countries where women were particularly down-trodden, are incurably romantic.

On one side stretched the beach, sprinkled with big modern buildings—Holidays Homes, Rest Homes, Pioneer Camps and forbidden zones bearing notices on the trees: 'Be careful—mines here!', grisly relics of the last war. The cliffs rose almost sheer beside the roadway with the line of the railway to Elbasan running at their feet. This was antique Petra where Pompey deployed his army to meet Caesar whose legions marched northward along the very road we are following south.

Goats grazed at impossible angles on the cliffs above the railway line where at every strategic point was a pillbox built by the Italians. The road here looped at the foot of the hills where almond trees blossomed above unbelievably green grass and young lambs gambolled. The Poet sighed ecstatically: 'It's good, it's good! As the trees are blossoming, so life will blossom.'

A pretty girl in the peasant costume of the region, a brilliant yellow scarf around her glossy black hair, signalled for a lift.

Spiro made a remark.

The Poet laughed. 'He says if he were alone, he would certainly have picked her up.'

A long way from the Kanun!

As we swept round to a wide river: '*Eh, voila! Le Shkumbin*. Here the great caravan trains passed along the Via Egnatia linking Rome and Byzantium. Here the Roman legions marched.'

'And here,' Spiro interjected, rather weary of history, 'the railway line now links Durres with the oil refinery at Cerrik.'

'Bon!'

Cheered by history, new and old, they began a frivolous song about a village Lothario singing of his conquests :

'Who burns like the flame of a lamp?

The wife of the verger.

Who is thin as cigarette-paper?

The wife of Vasil Stephani.

Who is like a jewel?

The wife of Athanase.'

The Professeur took up the travelogue : 'South of the river formerly extended the great marshland of Terbouf which covered thousands of acres of land and in times of flood damaged thousands of others. To-day, a canal takes them into the Adriatic and already about 25,000 acres are under cultivation. Gone the water. Gone the malaria. I caught it as a boy in Tirana.'

Indeed a whole new life has begun here. Peasants from the barren slopes of Laberia and nomadic Vlaks who for centuries brought their flocks down in the winter and went back again in the summer to their stony pastures, are now beginning to settle on the plains. A twist in the road brings us upon a man in a grey, loose, homespun cape, a peaked cheleshe, gaitered legs, carrying a newly-born lamb around his neck.

Here all is contrast—the shepherd who might have come out of the Bible, and the sheep that he tends quite clearly improved with Merino stock.

The groups of new red brick houses contrast with the ancient wattle and straw huts that the Vlaks built on the foothills.

Two dark-faced men wave to us from a tractor. Many of the nomadic gipsies are starting to be farmers in this newly opened-up area.

An interesting point is that the Kanun acknowledged the nomad life of the gipsies who were allowed to pitch their tents and graze their animals and gather firewood on the common lands.

West of the road, newly-ploughed fields, newly-built villages stretching away to the horizon. To the east, hillsides covered with newly-planted orchards and olive groves. Everywhere groups of soldiers either clearing the hills of native shrub or digging holes for the new trees that will be set.

'A garden, a garden!' cried the Poet. 'Soon all Albania will be a garden!'

Ahead of us a hill overlooking the whole coastal sweep. Sombre cypresses surrounding a white church—a monastery of Adenice, which is said to date back to 1474.

'Ah, *qu'il est beau, qu'il est beau*,' exclaimed the Poet.

'Bukur!' Spiro agreed.

Beautiful indeed. Quiet among its cypresses on the hilltop with the sky behind it so blue and high.

We debated whether we should turn off to visit it. But we had an appointment in Fieri, so we contented ourselves with examining reproductions of the frescoes painted by Albanian painters of the eighteenth century and clambered back into the car.

\* \* \*

Fieri! and the Festivali Folkloristi.

The streets were crowded with groups in the costumes of all the surrounding regions, ranging from the plain of Muzeqe to the mountains of Berat and Laberia: old men and young swinging their fustanellas, the knee-length full skirt that used to be common dress, which they tell me is descended from the Roman soldiers' tunic, woman and girls in costumes of too wide a variety to describe.

For three days the Festival had been going on, sorting out the competing groups. The winners would go to the National Festival to be held in Tirana.

As we arrived in the middle of the morning it was impossible to get near the packed hall, but it was just as much fun outside, for the competitors-to-be were practising on the grass. Spectators gave way as I edged my way to the front row of

the circle packed round a performance. When at last I appeared the performers looked at me in astonishment.

A gracious welcome. The troupe from the village of Roskovec and I exchanged introductions. The leader presented to me their gipsy orchestra, faces swarthy under brand-new cheleshes. They told me their orchestra was famed far and wide.

I had a private performance—if one excluded the several hundred locals who pressed round, climbed gum-trees, hung from telegraph poles, and mounted a ladder left against the wall.

A spring morning, blue sky, grass scattered with daisies and the air full of perfume. Women in their colourful costumes. Men in fustanellas over skin-tight gaiter-like trousers tied at the knee with black ribbons, gay waistcoats over bell-sleeved shirts, triangles of gay handkerchiefs apron-wise at the waist, cheleshes set far back on their heads. A music that set your blood dancing. Curious high cries invoking I knew not what. A dance that maybe the Spring Queen and Corn King danced when Greece was young.

Then two men, a rose between their teeth, danced to strange, wild music a strange, wild dance. Somehow I thought of a cock-fight, with the high-held heads, the measured pacing, the leaping, the air of male against male. Superb! The audience pressed so close that we saw the last of it in a narrow ring. Applause! The leader presented me with his rose.

Interval. News of my arrival percolated to the Committee inside and I was borne into the packed hall to watch from the official table. No casual affair this. The judges were a musicologist from Elbasan, a choreographer from the Ballet School in Tirana, and several others equally qualified.

This was the final sorting-out. The groups that had obtained high points in the earlier trials were undergoing their final test.

Choirs and dance groups from factories in the district, spick-and-span in the blue dungarees that have replaced the folk-costumes. Others wearing the costumes of their regions.

A group of men from a remote mountain village, its leader an old peasant intoning one of the songs of Laberia—a song of the mountaineers and their fight against the Turks. Something so lonely and primitive in its high wailing note that it sent a shiver along my spine. The musicologist tells me that such songs are found also in Epirus but their origins are so old that no one knows anything of them.

My friends from Roskovec won. When I congratulated them, I found they considered me as their mascot since I had all day worn their wilted rose.

Outside, as we went to drink a café turq, I met the old peasant leader. I congratulated him and he bent his spare body in its fustanella and planted two whiskery kisses on my cheeks. I must come and see their village, he said. Yes, I must come. It is only three hours on foot. When we said good-bye he gripped my hand in his wiry muscular one, and planted two more kisses on my cheeks.

There's more to Folkloristic Festivals than folklore.

## XXII

I'VE SEEN most of the famed coastal regions of the Pacific, the Mediterranean, the Atlantic, the Yellow Sea, the Sea of Japan and the Black Sea, but I know nothing to rival in virginal natural beauty the thirty miles of coast that stretch from Vlora to Butrint.

Here the mountains of Laberia rise from the sea, their snow-capped peaks reaching to nearly 7,000 feet, their broken foothills washed by limpid blue waters, their bays luxuriant with sub-tropical vegetation. The road loops like a gigantic ribbon round the mountain sides, climbing to dizzy heights, descending to picturesque villages clinging to steep slopes, and finally to delightful sandy beaches where the languid waves break clear and sparkling as champagne.

Here the Adriatic and the Ionian meet. Across these seas passed the ancient routes that linked Illyria with Greece and Sicily. Roman poets sang of its vineyards and olive-groves.

Relics of pagan days are still to be found in local customs though their significance has long been lost. When the grape-picking begins young girls evoke some ancient ceremony, inclining their bodies slightly and accompanying the movement with delicate hand-gestures to some forgotten god.

The Greeks founded colonies on bays and mountain plateaux dominating the routes that crossed Illyria. Roman legions marched across its hills. Byzantine and Venetian and Crusader

came this way. Along this stretch of coast the Turks fought some of their bitterest and longest campaigns, that in many places came to nothing.

Vlora lies on a picturesque gulf, surrounded on three sides by hills covered with olive-groves and vineyards and orchards. Sea and hill and mountain have made a framework for the city that seems at first a vast park. The geographer Ptolemy mentioned Aulona and the Romans praised its charms as a place of peaceful retreat for retired legionaries, since nothing was lacking to enable a man to live out his last days in beauty and contentment.

To-day, in mid-winter, the almond trees were flowering, the air full of the perfume of orange blossoms; in every garden was early summer.

As we turned out of Vlora, we passed a group of girls filling water-pots at a spring. Grace and strength combined! A long narrow-necked jar lying lengthways on their heads, a similar one under their arms and three smaller ones in their hands. An antique harmony of terra-cotta, white and black against a shimmering sea.

Like Durres, the whole of Vlora district is a vast archaeological site. One of the most famous discoveries was a statue of the fourth century B.C. 'The Young Girl of Vlora', which shows the dress of a young Illyrian girl. I was able to study a model of it, but alas! like so many of the precious relics of Illyria, it was taken away from Albania.

In the village of Ploce, some twenty miles along the road inland, was discovered a stadium situated on the slope of a hill where, about 200 B.C., stood a citadel of the antique city which it is now identified as Amantia. Certain characteristics indicate that it is of the Greek period, and that it underwent a later restoration under the Romans. The discovery of a stadium this size in an Illyrian town off the coast indicates the high degree of cultural and social and economic development that had been made by them. The stone seats have been unearthed

to an extent of approximately 180 feet on one side and 140 on the other.

Inscriptions in Greek graven on the stones, though incomplete, are enough to give an indication that the stadium was organized somewhat on the lines of those of our own time. They record a decree of the Town Council on how to employ the sum of 600 deniers prize-money offered by a citizen for a competition!

Twenty miles south of Vlora the waters of the Adriatic and the Aegean meet at the peninsula of Karaburun. Here stood the Greek city of Orichon, which reached such a stage of development that in 300 B.C. it minted its own coinage. For uncountable centuries it has been a refuge for sailors, and in the little port beside it are numerous inscriptions to the gods who saved them from the perils of the sea.

Along the road where the warriors of antiquity marched, we sped in an ascending series of breathtaking loops. Spiro has the steel nerves of a youth bred to this region, and the unshakable assurance of the good driver with faith in his car. Several curves up was visible an oil truck coming slowly down the mountain. Spiro slowed to meet it on a narrow pinch where we hung like a fly to the wall. Both drivers descended, rushed towards each other, embraced. A large bag changed hands. We edged past each other with shouted greetings.

Out of the bag came a napkin in which were wrapped fresh cakes, large oranges.

The driver was Spiro's brother-in-law. Spiro's mama had sent cakes and fruit to us lest we should be hungry on the road! Besides, she might not have the pleasure of seeing us as she expected we should go straight through to Saranda.

Then and there I decided, in spite of Spiro's half-hearted protests and the Professeur's insistence that there was no tourist hotel on the way, that we should visit Spiro's Mama.

The argument was still hanging in the air when we came out on the highest point of the road, Llogara, 3,400 feet above



the Ionian Sea, which stretched before us like shot taffeta, alternately ultramarine and silver. Below, the waters washed an ivory beach.

Here, suspended between mountain peak and sea, we stood for a long time. Six thousand feet above us, Mount Cike lifted a snow-covered crest against a sky that was bluer than the sea. A peasant driving a dozen scrawny mountain sheep came on us like something out of an old tale, his homespun knee breeches encircled with gaiters, his homespun coat flung cloakwise across his shoulders, a black cap set sideways. (It is called a fez though it doesn't resemble it.) He was a Laber, he told us, and, in his young days, lived high up on the mountain, bringing his sheep to the coast in winter. Now he lives on the coast with his son in winter, but likes to go back to the mountain tops in summer. 'The grass is sweeter there.'

In his grandfather's time they lived in constant struggle against the Turks. 'During all the five hundred years of Turkish Occupation, we of this region never paid taxes to the Sultan, never sent soldiers to serve in his armies. Our women fought beside our men. Three hundred years ago Nora Kelmendi sacrificed her life to kill Vuce Pasha and so save her people. They say she was young and beautiful. And when the Italians and Germans came, we fought against them in the same way.'

He waved to the Peak of Cike and eyed us hopefully. 'In three hours I could lead you up there and on a day like this, across the Channel of Otranto you can see the Italian coast.'

Regretfully I decided to forgo the view and, after a hand-grip that I felt for a long time, we left him with his sheep and his memories and began the descent of which the official guide-book says (with classic understatement): '*La prudence est de mise!*'

Hairpin bends brought us now to precipitous ravines scoured out of the mountainside, now to glimpses of luminous sea caught between dark groves of cypresses; over rocky arched stone bridges with the mountainside looming above us grey

and barren and then once more to the cliff-edge which overhangs the orange orchards, the beaches and the silver-blue Aegean whose horizon is lost in a pearl-shell mist.

To-day, the new villages nestle among orchards in the valley and the old cling like swallows' nests to rock and cliff.

With each descending loop Spiro sang more gaily. Then as we came out on a turn that revealed a terraced village clinging to the mountain and split by a roaring torrent, he stopped and looked back at me expectantly. There are only superlatives for it, with its stone houses surrounded by the metallic grey of olives the lustruous green of orange trees, the wooded valley that drops sharply to the tiny sickle of beach where the waves roll over in a frill of foam, and Mount Cike towers above it all. 'Dhermi!' Spiro said with his widest smile and I knew from his voice that he was home.

It was a triumphal drive through the village, with school-children shouting to Spiro from the roadside, girls at the fountain turning to smile and women leaning over balconies to wave. A halt and a word with a woman who comes running down the steps.

'My sister,' Spiro explained; and I knew that a message has gone to warn Mama.

We turned back, first to the beach, past the little church of Our Lady perched on a rocky cliff. It dates from the tenth century though the frescoes that adorn it are of three different periods. Most interesting are those which show saints wearing the dress of the region.

Down the winding road, overhung with sub-tropical vegetation ending at a Rest Home of attractive modern design to which the builders were putting the last touches. Strange to see palm-trees in the shadow of Cike's snows. A clean, sandy beach tucked in the shelter of a small bay where the sun beat down with a warmth that made me think of taking a plunge in the crystal clear waters, while a storm had begun to rage round the peaks.

Later, I sat for a while on a rock with the water effervescing at my feet and the perfume of orange blossom drifting to me, the Aegean moire with catspaws coming off the land. Cike's storm has begun to send shivers down the mountainside.

Dhermi, the pearl of the Albanian Riviera! Ancient poets sang of it. One day modern ones from all over the world will do the same.

\* \* \*

Mama stood at the door of her neat little white-washed cottage watching us come up the steep path through the olive grove. Small and fine-boned, her black veil throws into relief her large dark eyes that alone have survived the attrition of time. She took my hands in her thin little ones and welcomed me in Greek. Here I might say, Spiro took over as interpreter, for his family is one of the Greek minority of Southern Albania.

A room spare and clean as the inside of a shell. Through the window orange trees and olive trees and the deepening blue of the sea!

Spiro is master of the house. He takes on a new dignity as he steps over the threshold. His mother gazes at him with pride shining in her eyes. His sister defers to him. I learn that his father was a long time 'in emigration', coming home only to die.

Coffee is served. Oh, such grace and courtesy! We drink while mother and sister sit on a divan and watch and listen.

Mama gives me the last of the oranges she has been cherishing for just this moment, and a bunch of spring-onions, since I have commented on their being early.

When we say good-bye she hesitates a moment then puts her thin arms round me and presses her faded cheek to mine, murmuring Farewell in a voice that trembles a little.

I walked on so that Spiro might have a brief moment alone. Though Albania is so small it may be a long time before she sees her son again.

On the road once more, I teased Spiro about all the girls

who waved him good-bye and he said with a solemnity unusual to him : 'When I marry I shall marry a girl of Dhermi. They are the most beautiful in the world.'

It was a long time before he began to sing again—a lament in a poignant minor key. 'A mother weeps for her son who is emigrating. So bitter are her cries of grief that the ship itself refuses to sail.'

We began to wind upward again. The air full of the scent of innumerable roadside flowers.

Vuno! In spite of being destroyed during the fighting the village still lives among its olive groves tucked in a cleft at Cike's foot. We stopped to drink at the gushing spring, talk with some young soldiers. As I got back into the car, one of them came rushing up and handed to me two of the largest specimens of unnamed citrus fruits I've seen anywhere. We went off amidst cheers, our road winding up Cike's flanks, till we no longer saw the ocean but only blossoming almond trees hanging from precipitous cliffs.

A sudden curve and below a placid bay, the perfect arc of a beach golden in the western light, and twin towns, one nestling among the rich vegetation of the valley, the other perched on a rocky hill that overlooks it all.

Himara! the Chimaera of antiquity, a term that once comprised the coast from Vlora to Butrint, of which Pliny wrote in the first century B.C. A romantic's dream of perfection, with Cike's snows fiery in the oblique light against a turquoise sky, its cleft flanks deepening from amethyst to indigo, the ruins of an Illyrian citadel and the sea below a shimmering pool of light.

Much fluster in the little hotel by the beach. The manager explained in good English—he was 'in emigration' for many years—that they were not prepared for foreign tourists. (I've been hearing this from the Professeur and Spiro ever since I took the day's plans into my own hands.) I pointed out that I had camped in the Australian bush, slept in Chinese temples,

travelled on ex-troopships and stayed in hotels all over the world from first class to no class at all. Voices rose in argument in Albanian, Greek, Italian and English.

I settled the matter by stating firmly that I was too tired to drive another mile and if there was no room I'd sleep in the car.

Of course there was a room, with a tiny balcony overlooking the sea. Spotless, a comfortable bed, and a ceiling that had been painted by some wandering surrealist in a variety of odd designs.

We ate a good dinner (as usual by the sea—no fish on the menu!) A young moon floated like a sliver of white jade above the sea and I slept to the sound of a light surf swishing on the beach. Till midnight, when all hell broke loose in the corridor outside my room.

Tramping of boots, loud voices, much shushing—silence.

Next morning the Manager apologized, his wife apologized, the waiter apologized, the policeman apologized, every Himaran I met apologized.

The Professeur explained that the Manager had explained that the police had explained that—not knowing I was there—they had swooped down on two fishermen who were enjoying a shake-down in my corridor. Some question of illegal fishing—I never got the whole story clear. I had a feeling that they are so short of crime in the region, that they would have thoroughly enjoyed it if it hadn't been for me.

For breakfast I had delicious fried fish. . . .

We wandered for hours among the ruins of the Illyrian fortress, guided by a lame old man who spoke a rickety French (he had been 'in emigration' in France). He wasn't an official guide, just a volunteer who liked to talk with foreigners. Lovingly he placed his gnarled hand on the enormous smooth stone blocks that some similar hand had cut five hundred years before our era began, when the Illyrian-Epirot tribe set up its defences against enemies coming from the sea. No one has

yet begun excavations here so it is not known what riches may lie hidden.

Lower down on the slopes are the twin bridges of a castle built between two torrents and to the south a donjon used in mediaeval times stands in a good state of preservation.

It was afternoon when we left. The kindergarten in clean white pinnies, stopped on its afternoon walk to sing us off in piping voices, an occasional adventurous one rushing from the ranks to shake hands amidst a chorus of giggles.

Winding, rising, falling, the road runs between cloud-wrapped mountain and scintillating sea. Porto Palermo (the ancient Panormus) Qeparo, Borsh, which in Illyrian times defended the roads that led to Laberia.

Old and new. Solid houses on precipitous crags clustered around the ruins of fortresses built in Illyrian days, re-built when the Crusaders passed that way, re-built once more to throw back the Turkish invasions, and last used as partisan bases when Italian and German armies swarmed into the country.

The Riviera is now flourishing. Its rushing torrents have been used to bring electricity. Its marshy valleys drained for orchards and market-gardens. Soon it will provide the first-of-the-season fruits and vegetables not only for Albania but many Central European countries. With modern trawlers and cargo-boats the seamen of Himara will not need to emigrate and the fortresses will serve only for archaeological research.

At the highest point of the road, where a thick mist was swirling down the mountainside, I looked back, saying aloud : 'Some day I shall come back.'

Spiro smiled. 'Of course. Everybody comes back to Himara.'

### XXIII

WE CAME down the mountains in a fog when already dusk was gathering and we could see nothing but occasional rounded summits against the sky. Suddenly, in a curve of the road, Saranda opened out below us, its waters glittering against an apricot sky-line cut by the indigo silhouette of Corfu. Another quarter of an hour and we stopped before the white façade of the Saranda Hotel.

I got out a little drunk from the innumerable curves of the roads we had travelled. The manager greeted us in French.

A comfortable room. On the floor a magnificent hand-woven carpet strangely harmonious in deep reds and blues and green and rose.

For a long time I leant on the balcony railing, the town a half-circle of lights, signal buoys tossing their red and white warnings on the bay, the air fresh with the tang of salt and sweet with the perfume of orange blossom, and Venus blazing in the western sky.

\* \* \*

Morning, and the bay a pool of shimmering light, a line of misty islands on either side of Corfu giving it the impression of a lake.

Saranda stretches at the foot of an amphitheatre of hills, its rows of houses pink and white and apple-green among eucalyptus groves and cypresses, the grey spire of a minaret seeming incongruously old.

Mikhale, the quiet waiter, in answer to my questions tells us over excellent coffee that it is practically a new town built since the Liberation. The Italians, the Greeks, the Germans, did their worst with it and during the Liberation the English finished what was left.

The little maid nods enthusiastically. She is Greek-Moslem—her family refugees during the war. They don't want to go back because there is no work in Greece.

After breakfast I wandered along the sea wall by a sea of scintillating sapphire under a sky of purest azure.

I have been in many Mediterranean fishing towns but never one so clean as this. Even the sea is so extraordinarily clear that the sunlight dances on the stones below. Difficult to believe that less than an hour away the snow is thick on the mountains. Here it is perpetual spring and already plum trees drop showers of petals over stone walls.

Though it is a new town it goes back to days far beyond our era and the name comes from a mediaeval monastery called the Forty Saints, whose ruins remained till the last war. But its history is far older than that; ancient geographers described it as Onchesmos, one of the important ports of Epirus.

Like all Albania it has an interminable record of invasion and resistance, war and destruction, destruction and war.

In 1908, when the National Movement was at its height, partisans entered the town, supplied themselves with everything they needed from Turkish garrisons and fled to the hills again to continue their struggle against the Sultan.

A pleasant jangling of bells as a string of horses passed, each with four kegs of water attached to its saddle. The young peasant in black-gaitered homespun with swinging coat salutes to our '*Mirdita*' but replies '*Cali mera*'. He belongs to the Greek minority scattered through all these villages.

Two women in striking costumes make their way up the road, the younger with a brightly-painted cradle strapped to



her back, the red cords that support it wrapped round her hands. They have been shopping.

They reply to my '*Mirdita*' in Greek. The older woman knows some Albanian and I battled out that her daughter-in-law carries her five-month-old baby on her back. It is wrapped in a hand-spun rug of lime yellow and she lifts the veil to show us its sleeping face.

'How far have you to go?'

'Not far. Only an hour's walk.'

To-day Saranda is full of villagers down from the hills. I peep in on a group of them in the old Orthodox Church, the young women in fine veils edged with sequins. A priest is chanting and the church is full of the perfume of incense.

In the street five older men, obviously bursting with curiosity, reply to my '*Mirdita*' by asking if I am Albanian! I'm flattered but my Albanian is soon exhausted. They persist. Do I speak Turkish? I don't? Greek? No! Yugoslav? No! We find a common base in Italian. All are eager to talk, the one who knows Italian translating.

Passing the kindergarten the children run to look at us—a hundred of them here, the three teachers tell us, but there is another kindergarten in the village.

'Will you sing for us?' I ask, and, at a word from the teachers the childish voices rise in the bright air:

*'Po vjen a prandvera  
Me shum bukuri.'*

'Springtime has come! How beautiful it is!'

The policeman comes to lean on the wall and smiles at us. Two fishermen, faces dark with a week's growth, stop, nodding their heads to the refrain, one smiling a wide two-toothed smile.

\* \* \*

Late afternoon and we walk on the stony hillside plucking tiny wild irises, three mauve blooms to each stem. Next

morning there is not one to be seen, all blooming and dying in a day. Past us go a group of peasant girls in their best, full skirts and gay stockings, down to town to the cinema, their white veils floating over their plaits. Behind them walk the boys, clad in ordinary Western clothes. '*Mim brama,*' comes in an unfamiliar accent.

At nine o'clock I hear along the road one of the strange songs of Laberia and I look out. The same peasants going home. I'm glad to see as they pass beneath the electric light that some of them have paired off!

\* \* \*

From the back terrace next morning I looked down into the garden and saw, eating from the same dish as three cats, what I took to be a fawn and brown turkey hen. Startled at my shadow it looked up. I was equally startled as its fierce eyes glared at me. An eagle at least twenty inches high with a wing spread of three feet! It ran away and hid under a bush from which its legs protruded and a fierce eye watched me through the leaves.

'*Po si. Shqiponja,*' Mikhale said. 'We caught it very young a year or more ago. Clip its wings? (He was shocked.) Oh no! It is quite happy here with the cats. It has its own house we built for it and when it is evening it goes to bed of its own accord!'

Are they domesticating the eagle, too, I wonder?

When the sun had gone down I wandered along the road that leads round the bay, rocky slopes rising sharply from the water. Silhouetted against the lavender sky a woman in a scarlet citjane mustered her two brown-and-white milking sheep.

A family leant over the retaining wall of their high garden. We exchanged greetings and they extracted a brief resumé of my history in faltering Shqip and a wobbly Italian provided by the eldest son. Mother wears a citjane, black veil swathed

round her head, but son and daughter-in-law are modern. The expected question: 'Do you milk sheep in Australia?' And the usual wonderment at all that good milk going to waste!

Thy invited me in. '*Nesse!*' I promised. '*Domani*'—Tomorrow. It was already late and they would be waiting for me at the hotel.

Over supper of delicious kos and equally delicious butter and creamy coffee, I remembered the sheep and asked: 'Are they from sheep's milk?'

'*Po si!* The best!' Mikhale assured me. And another prejudice went west.

\* \* \*

Sunday morning. The two bells of the Greek church were ringing as I tried to step on to the launch which was to take me to Butrint. The wide gap was rather perilous for me and innumerable hands pulled and others pushed me over. At the last moment the Chairman of the City Council whom I had met by accident on the wharf, decided to come too, and swung his six-year-old son aboard where about a score of officers and soldiers of the local garrison were already installed.

'You don't mind?' a major asked when I landed safely on the deck. 'The launch doesn't often go in winter and we are all anxious to see Butrint.'

The fast launch sped south, the water breaking away from the bow in iridescent spray and there I was in search of Illyria with the largest and most impressive military escort I'm ever likely to have, armed with cameras!

As we passed down the bay, the Chairman took the wheel. He wore jodphurs and a leather jacket with a cap pulled down over his keen dark eyes, emphasizing a profile that might have served for a Greek statue. He was proud of his town of 5,000 inhabitants and told me about it as we crossed the bay between the steep hills of Saranda and the island of Corfu.

'There was nothing modern here before the war, only shacks,'

he said. 'Now there's electricity and factories. See there! The waters of three rivers will soon enter the sea.' The launch passed close enough to see the forty-foot-high gash cut through the rocky shore.

'The people here form a Greek minority. In the last war they fought side by side with Albanian partisans—women as well as men. On one occasion they helped me to escape. These mountains were full of partisans.'

He was silent a moment looking at the mountains that rise steep and inhospitable round the bay, running north and west up to peaks covered with snow.

'Many Italian soldiers joined us when Italy capitulated. Those who didn't were killed by the Nazis.'

Impossible to think of killing on a morning like this, with the spray glittering in the crystalline air, the shadow of Corfu lilac-grey in the calm sea, and northward the reflection of the snow-covered peak of Cike falling across the water like the light of a frozen star.

\* \* \*

My mind re-created the ships that once swept across these waters, back to the Trojans, who, according to Virgil in the *Æneid*,\* seeking to establish a new home after Troy was burnt, chose the shore of this lake at the end of the peninsula of Ksamil.

Legend apart, the Illyrians of Epirus certainly had a city here in the seventh century before our era. In the sixth century Greeks came from Corfu to establish a colony linked by road with Apollonia and Epidamnus.

Like all the rest of coastal Albania at some time or other all the armies of Europe have been here.

In the thirteenth century a subsidence of the region destroyed its importance and no more is heard of it till the Venetians took it in the fourteenth century and held it till the

\* BK.III—Verse 292 and following.

French occupied it in 1797 only to be chased out a year later by Ali Pasha of Tepelena, a powerful feudal lord of Southern Albania, whom Byron visited in 1812. Ali Pasha built two new fortresses, the largest of which still dominates the countryside and the sea from the top of the hill. Here he used to come for hunting parties—game this time, not foreign invaders!

I was roused from my contemplation of history by a shouted farewell from the Chairman who had decided to return on a passing fishing launch because his small son was wailing: 'I want to go home!'

\* \* \*

At the rough landing-place a man waited, small and neat in high boots and jodphurs and a red waistcoat. He was to be our cicerone and he began by telling us all frigidly—with the air of a man who expects the worst of tourists—that we mustn't put so much as a finger on anything! ANYTHING!

We stepped cautiously over grass sprinkled with daisies, between the weathered fragments of columns and a few headless torsos, up the stony track to the fortress the Major constitutioning himself my escort. We looked down on the slopes covered with thick vegetation and a little lake acid-green between pallid rushes.

Unfreezing at our perfect behaviour our guide told us that where we stood was once the Acropolis of the triple-walled city of Buthroton; that all we can see below is an archaeological zone. The greater part of the city is under the lake. The swamp is being drained to make a state farm, and who knows what archaeological riches will be discovered. Three of the four gates of the city have already been found. Italian archaeologists built the modern museum on the site of a mediaeval donjon, but it contains little of value. Everything good was taken away. He waves an expressive hand towards the distant Italian coast and his face darkens. He puts a hand tenderly on the plinth of a plaster reproduction of an extraordinarily

beautiful head—the original is said to be in Rome. Like a man praying, he murmurs: 'The Goddess of Butrint. One of the loveliest of ancient heads, said to be of the school of Praxiteles.'

The soldiers gather round murmuring: '*Perendesh e Butrinti.*'

'*Bukur, bukur!*' Beautiful!

A young soldier lays before the Goddess a few violets he has gathered on our way up.

We move on to the headless body of a woman, the graceful draping of her robe captured as though stirred by a breeze.

'*Artisto!*' says the Major, following the line of a marble curve with a nicotine-stained finger held scrupulously an inch away from it.

There are few things here but perhaps their fewness makes one examine them more closely. I have never lingered in the galleries of the British Museum or the Louvre, the Museo Vaticano or the Museo Nazionale, or the Hermitage, literally crammed with the riches of ancient Greece, as I do here over the sweep of a robe miraculously fixed in marble. Never marvelled at the curve of a child's leg and thigh where nothing else is left. Never been so touched as here by the robe covering the knees of a sitting child and the one small sandalled foot peeping from the skirt. The headless body of a Roman warrior is in some way less banal than the rank on rank of muscular torsoes in so many overcrowded European museums. The headless Illyrian woman, the marble ribbon moulding her high, firm breasts, a perfect foot in a sandal with the cord running between the toes, has the charm of uniqueness, the defaced head of a child has a sweet artlessness.

Life was lived here—people like us were born, loved and died. Sandalled feet ran and danced on this flower-strewn grass under a spring sky. Laughter sounded where now there is no sound but the birds, and Spiro humming 'The Goddess of Beauty'. Spiro, I'm glad to say, is romantic.

We go down a pathway soft with leaf-mould and moss and

come suddenly upon a great gateway in stone with above it the weathered bas-relief of a lion at grips with a bull whose horned head alone survives.

Here, according to legend, via Virgil, the Oracle said to Æneas: 'You will go far away and when you find a wounded bull, there you will settle.'

We are permitted to lay our hands on the enormously solid Illyrian walls of the sixth century B.C. each block weighing at least two tons. My mind tries to encompass the picture of panting slaves dragging the huge blocks into place. The arched gateway is fifteen feet thick and twenty feet high, the stones in the inner arch finely rounded.

In the midst of the archway are the raised footholds for the guards. The Major stands on one and I stand opposite him.

'That's how the guard would have stood in ancient Butrint,' the guide explained, thrusting a stick into the Major's hand, 'the spear thus—without moving at all. *Disciplina!*'

I said, 'I hope it's not like that to-day!'

The Major and the soldiers laugh uproariously and assure me it isn't.

It is chilly under the archway and we wander down the mossy track under thick laurels. The Major breaks a twig for me saying, '*Dafina*', and rubs a leaf so that I smell the spicy aroma.

We sat a long time on the semi-circular seats of the Greek amphitheatre, its stones warm in the sun. Here in the fourth century B.C. the notables sat. The seats at the top are narrower and no doubt were cheaper, since you'd be in constant danger of having a sandalled foot thrust into your back at a critical moment of the performance.

We looked down on to the orchestra pit, now filled with water, where are reflected the broken arches that formed the background of the stage built by the Romans when they took Butrint (and many slaves!) in 167 B.C. In their great day the arches were covered with vari-coloured marbles and the

Goddess of Butrint occupied one of the niches where she was unearthed more than two thousand years later.

Now the bricks are bare and a single plant spills its blood-red flowers against the grey. Like blood indeed, for there are records of gladiatorial combats on this stage, and a small infirmary still stands at the right side for those who survived the combats.

In Grecian times it was used also for the meetings of the City Senate and on the stones one can still read clearly the Laws and Decrees of the third century B.C. engraved finely and deeply in the stones.

Reluctantly I leave the theatre, imagining I hear in the pure air the ghostly voices of vanished Medeas and Iphigenias, where now a sulphur butterfly flutters erratically above its reflection.

Daisies star the remains of houses and Roman baths, cemetery and temple. The past stretches out a hand to touch mine beside the well where the rope has worn deep into the stone and a niche in the wall shows where the bucket stood. Here the centuries meet and mingle and time stands still.

On the site of an older temple, the Byzantians erected a baptistery. Its broken columns surround the marble cruciform baptismal basin with its containers for oil and salt. Mosaics cover the floor, recording, in vari-coloured stone, Christian symbols, the Chalice surrounded with a vine, the hart that 'panteth after water', two peacocks that symbolize the soul.

As we make our way back to the launch, the sun is sinking behind the dark ridge of Corfu. Long shadows lie on the flower-strewn grass and the plum tree on the wall of the Acropolis spills a shower upon the ancient stones.



## XXIV

WHEN THE road tops the mountains that lie behind Saranda, you can look back on the town and the sea where the Island of Corfu stands like a giant natural fortress. Before you lies a green and fertile plain surrounded by high mountains—the region of Vurku of Delvine.

Ancient historians spoke of the marshes of Delvina. Byron wrote of them when he passed that way in 1809. To-day the marshes have given way before the onslaught of dredge and earth-moving machines and bull-dozers: ending with the digging of the new river-bed whose outlet I saw gashed in the cliffside of Saranda Bay. From a malaria-ridden swamp Vurku is now transformed into a rich plain, and already orchards and vineyards are flourishing.

Near by are the ruins of Finiqi, topping the hills between Saranda and Delvina. Strabon and Polybius agree that it was the most powerful city of Epirus in the fourth century B.C. Remains of Celtic garrisons are to be found there: Illyrian, Roman, Byzantine.

To-day only its ruins recall its former grandeur. Remains of the city wall rising twenty feet high can be traced for nearly a mile, enormous quadrilateral stones placed one on the other in typical late-Illyrian fashion. Within, there is a small treasure-house from the fourth century B.C., Greek and Roman tombs and the remains of a baptistery built on the site of some pagan temple. Excavation may yet reveal much more.

I watched the outline of its ruins dark against a fleecy sky as we set out along the route that Byron had travelled on horseback a century and a half before. He had a guard of fifty men, since Ali Pasha was at war with Ibrahim Pasha of Berat. It took Byron and his friends nine days on horseback to make the journey I made in a few hours.

Difficult as his journey was, Byron fell in love with the country. Albania reciprocates and celebrates the anniversary of his death. He is translated into Albanian with a portrait of him in Albanian dress on the cover.

What Byron wrote in the appendix to *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* is still true—'No pen or pencil can ever do justice to the scenery.'

To-day the same wild beauty unfolded that inspired him to write :

'Land of Albania ! Let me bend my eyes  
On thee, thou rugged nurse of savage men !  
The cross descends, thy minarets arise,  
And the pale crescent sparkles in the glen,  
Through many a cypress grove within each city's ken.'

The 'savage men' have gone. Now there are only the peasants with their donkeys stepping daintily along the road, road workers leaning on their shovels to wave as we pass. The women among them continue a long tradition. Byron wrote, 'the women who came to repair the road we were to pass were among the most beautiful I have ever seen.'

\* \* \*

Storm clouds billowed over the mountains like smoke out of some underworld furnace as we began the winding ascent to Gjinokaster. With its citadel looming ominously above the town it looks like an illustration to some fabulous story. Perched on three steep stony outcrops between the snowy crest of Mali Gjere and the green valley of Dropull, the stone houses rising

shelf by shelf seem to have grown out of the bare mountain. Each cluster is separated by abrupt narrow gulleys worn by torrents in their precipitous rush to the plain.

As the white road lined with newly-planted saplings wound ever higher we looked down on roofs made of the same stone 'slates' topped with chimneys like witches' hats. Never have I seen a city so fantastically picturesque.

Gjinokaster seems to have been built to delight the eye rather than to live in. Minarets and the bell-tower of an Orthodox Church surmount the irregular roof-line, and among the older houses, weathered a pale grey, large new buildings with pink tiled roofs stand out in sharp contrast that is not unpleasing.

'*Mim brama,*' said an old man in ancient peasant clothes as I got out of the car. 'And what country do you come from?'

When I said Australia his eyes shone. 'Ah, my son emigrated there before the last war. But he's back now. A pity he's up in Tirana at a conference. He could have talked to you. He speaks good Australian.'

He turned and looked across the valley. A ray of light poured down from swollen purple clouds on to snow-covered range and winding river, beside which a group of peaked haystacks looked oddly like an encampment of Genghis Khan.

'*Panorama bukur?*' he inquired, clearly expecting an enthusiastic response.

Beautiful it is indeed.

We walked slowly up the steep, narrow street glistening after a shower. Here the white Albanian cap takes a new form and name. It is bell-shaped with a tiny tail topping it, and is called a qylah (chulah). Many men wear a black forage-cap that is called a fez but doesn't resemble its Turkish counterpart.

The rain came and we took refuge in the nearest coffee house. When it stopped, we ventured out, meeting at the door

the Director of the Museum who had been searching for us. Fortunately he spoke French so the Professeur and Spiro were able to take a rest.

We walked to a level spot where several streets converged, above which the town loudspeaker is suspended. Apparently, being the one level place in the town it is the established meeting place. We made our way through the curious crowd—peasants in home-spun, office-workers in modern overcoats, porters with an L-shaped padded framework on their backs. Here life would stop without porters. All are waiting for the news broadcast, listening in the meantime to a Gjinokastran song about Cerciz Topulli, the local hero, killed fighting the Turks.

The Director translated the words—half-chant, half-lament—which tells how in 1908 Cerciz and his brother led a detachment of partisans who in the village of Mashkullore inflicted a crushing defeat on the enemy.

‘We are making a pilgrimage to Mashkullore on Sunday,’ he said. ‘You must stay for it.’

From the minaret a hoxha called to evening prayer and the soft cold rain began again.

‘*Un café?*’ suggested the Director and we took refuge in another coffee shop—not that one needs any excuse in Albania for diving into a coffee shop!

It was small and crowded and chairs were pushed together to make room for us almost on top of the next table, where a trio eyed us expectantly. A woman in a Greek kerchief spoke rapidly to her husband and he turned to us. ‘Please will you excuse me but my wife’s father is in Australia. Will you please give him a message?’

He wrote his own name painstakingly—Vasil Dhimojorgji. ‘Tell him we are looking forward to his return. He’ll find things very different now. When he went away we hadn’t even the right to water our fields or our sheep.’

‘Ah!’ said the Director, ‘I have with me an original letter

of Mufti Bey who was the Minister of Finance in the first government of Zogu. He owned the village of Libohove.'

He opened his portfolio and took out a thick typescript of the history of Gjinokaster region illustrated with old photographs and original documents. 'I am preparing this monograph for our Anniversary', he explained, 'and I brought it to show you.'

'Here is a photostat of the document.'

We peered at the letter written in 1920 in Turkish script. He translated: 'The water belongs to us, the feudal landlords. If the peasants want water let them come to the Tribunal. I am a descendant of Ali Pasha of Tepelena.'

By now everyone was listening and an old peasant shook his shaggy head topped with a discoloured qylah:

'*Po si!* And so we went to the Tribunal, we the peasants!'

'Huh!' someone grunted.

'And what did the Tribunal do?' I asked.

'Nothing!'

'Nothing!' growled the room.

'So we drank water from the wells and there was always much typhoid in our villages. But what did a peasant more or less matter to the beys?'

As we left, a man told me that his father had just returned after thirty-one years in Australia!

'It is curious,' he said, 'but he still speaks as though he is in Brisbane.'

Next morning though a fine rain was falling intermittently we set out to climb to the citadel by the winding rocky road. An old one-eyed man passed us leading three pack-horses laden with milk-cans. He touched his hand to his qylah and called '*Cali mera.*'

A girl in wine citjane and a green blouse leant in the doorway of a tiny shop where a very modern young man was making a pack-saddle for a donkey—a solid affair with wooden ribs covered with leather and well-lined.

He tells us he makes one a day and it costs 1,400 leks. A profitable trade.

Leaning against the stone balustrade a woman in a black citjane and a homespun black jacket, was spinning unconcernedly from a distaff. I stopped, for it was the first chance I had had to examine one.

With a smile she handed to me the forked distaff with its mop of grey wool from which she spun a thick thread. 'It is for carpets,' she explained. 'I spin even when I am walking. A friend and I walk together spinning and talking. Even when we have a heavy load on our back we spin. I have four children so there is no time to waste.'

She shook her two plaits in laughter as I struggled ineffectually with distaff and spindle and as I handed them back she put her arms round me and kissed me on each cheek. We tripped over each other's names and she invited me to visit her in the village of Lazaret. At the curve of the road I turned and she waved her distaff without stopping the twirling spindle.

Overpowering in its grandeur, the great wall of the citadel loomed over us.

'Legend says that the city was founded in A.D. 568 by a princess named Agyros who flung herself with her child from the battlements to escape capture, but we consider that history is closer to the truth when it associates it with the Agyres, an Illyrian tribe not far from here,' the Director said as we paused under the enormous entrance gate and watched the rain drive over the magnificent sweep of mountain and valley.

'Though its foundations belong to an ancient period of which we are not certain, the citadel is first mentioned during the wars between Byzantium and Epirus. When it fell to the Turks, countless attacks were made by the local people in the attempt to free it.'

The citadel is a strategic masterpiece. One enters through a bottle-shaped tunnel. Where it widens, three arches and

three deep window embrasures frame mountains and valley in the vivid unreality of a stereoscope.

'In the eighteenth century, Ali Pasha of Tepelena reconstructed the fortress and so perfect is its condition to-day that it served for the location of the film *Skanderbeg*. It can hold 5,000 men.'

We emerged from the gloom of the enormous brick and stone corridors on to a terrace that hangs like a swallow's nest above the cliff. Immediately below us was the dome of an Orthodox church destroyed by the Turks, a mosque surrounded by cypresses and the stone-shingled roofs of Gjinokaster shining after the rain. Beyond, through the valley flowed the Drin, beyond it a rampart of mountains lost in cloud.

'Soon, when the Museum is completed here, we shall make a coffee-garden on this terrace and everyone can come and enjoy the view.'

He opened a book written by one of Napoleon's French consuls at Athens in 1806 and showed me the drawings. 'Here you can see how it looked a hundred and fifty years ago.'

For hours we wandered through the vast arched galleries added by Ali Pasha. Fifty feet they rose above us, a fireplace high up in the wall showing where the upper floor had been, once the acme of feudal magnificence.

Out on the grassy plateau where once 5,000 soldiers paraded, the Director brought me back to the peaceful present: 'We hold a Folklorique Festival here every autumn. You must come back for it. The villages round here have beautiful songs and dances.'

Out through the massive gateway on the opposite side, the giant walls of the fortress rising above us, forbidding in their height and strength.

'From that tower a partisan, Dilo Balili, escaped from the Fascists during the last war, descending by a rope that had been smuggled in to him.'

I gasped, trying to reconcile the picture of the young partisan

dangling from the high tower above precipitous cliffs, with the slender, elegant Albanian Ambassador to China with whom I had clinked champagne glasses at a reception in Peking where I settled my plans to visit Albania.

A young peasant pastured his sheep in the shadow of the citadel's walls where, incongruously, a flowering plum tree hung. Three small girls peeped over my shoulder at my notebook. As I was busy practising my Albanian I asked them their names. 'Katrina, Diana and Irena,' they said and went off into a fit of giggles at my peculiar accent.

We rounded the citadel by a rocky path and went down the road where a kindergarten on its morning walk was singing shrilly.

\* \* \*

The last thing I expected when I came to Albania was to find myself giving a lesson to a class at the Gjinokaster Gymnasium and Pedagogical School.

It has had a chequered career this school, so its Director tells me. Founded in 1923 it was closed and opened, chopped and changed so often that, by 1939, only nine students had managed to graduate from it.

Now the school has 500 pupils, a third of them girls. It has been a hard fight to get that proportion, since there is still much conservatism in the villages and a reluctance to let girls come away to be educated.

'Thoma Papapano (seventy-six, tall, powerful, with fifty-one years of service) is the grand old man of Albanian education and is an inspiration to us all,' the young Director said looking fondly at Thoma's ruddy, smiling face. 'He taught in the first school in Albania founded here in 1908 and he has chosen to keep on teaching to give us the benefit of his experience, which we badly lack. You see, we had no educational traditions in our country. We had practically no equipment when we started this school. I teach physics and I never had a chance of working in a laboratory till last year



when China sent us a wonderful gift: equipment for an up-to-date laboratory! We also lack text-books in Albanian. You might say everything had to start from the beginning!

At their request I promise to write to the Director of Education for a High School syllabus. 'It is in English,' I warned him.

'No matter!' said the Director. 'We shall find someone to translate it.' (A year later I heard they had done so!)

In the pleasant mood induced by my reception, I rashly agreed to give a lesson on Australia.

Next morning in an airy class-room hung with excellent maps drawn by the students, I looked from the map of Australia to the intense, eager faces of fifteen-year-old girls and boys before me and had a moment of panic. The group of teachers in the back desks and the interpreter beside me didn't help.

How describe this vast country of mine where Albania would fit into one tiny corner?

Looking beyond the faces to the splendour of the mountains in the morning light, my eyes fell on the little partisan cemetery where *their* dead sleep under *my* gum-trees, and I relaxed.

I raised the pointer and traced the oceans that wash my country 8,000 miles away. Neither frontiers, nor language count. We are all one family.

I went at last, my arms filled with bunches of hyacinths and tight posies of tiny violets of a purple deeper than I have ever seen, a perfume sweeter. And my Albanian pupils leant over the balustrade calling after me '*Lamtumire*'.

\* \* \*

Over dinner (a very good dinner too) our soft-voiced waiter Spiro, with sensitive thin face, having heard of the lecture, told us that he had always wanted to go to school but his father had been only a poor café-keeper and he, too, had had to work from a very early age. But now his four children go to

school. The eldest has just finished High School and will go on to the University. 'So my son achieves the desire of my heart.'

\* \* \*

A sunny day; everything sparkling after rain. The line of snow-clad mountains dazzling white against a serene blue sky.

At the foot of the hill we dropped in to visit the new hospital opened only in 1950. Three doctors who in themselves symbolize Albania's history, showed me round.

The oldest of them, Dr Vasil Laboveti studied in Austria *before* the Liberation. Dr Babotchi *after*, in Budapest. Dr Angel Congoli in the new Medical School in Tirana.

The hospital, an attractive modern building, has 300 beds for general cases as well as a Maternity Section with 50 beds.

I visited the two up-to-date operating theatres. The staff is just cleaning up after an operation on a peasant woman. She is doing well.

When I went out, her family in typical homespun village clothes was waiting on the porch.

'God be praised, she will live,' her husband said. 'Her mother died of the same sickness.'

The garden is gay with daffodils and campanilas. Spring has come to Gjinokaster in more ways than one!

\* \* \*

Ahead the road, startlingly white. Not far off, closing the green and fertile valley of Dropulli, the snowy mountains of Greece. Past the Tractor Station, over a three-century-old Turkish bridge, its graceful stone arches mirrored in the emerald water of the Drin. Past villages where pinkish-beige houses, all of laminated limestone even to the roof, huddle together on the storm-scoured steep slopes.

To-day the river flats, where a few years ago the beys' shepherds grazed their sheep, are dotted with tractors turning the damp soil for new crops. On the roads donkeys under

laden saddle-bags. Men in homespun gaitered trousers, homespun coats swaying from their shoulders, qylahs at all angles and occasionally a black fez. Women with their peaked kerchiefs as snowy as the mountain tops, their embroidered aprons of all designs and colours.

Jersey herds in the fields. Sheep showing an obvious merino strain—they are in their 'third cross'. New vineyards and orchards.

A road sign : Goranzi. The car crunched over the stony road past the Red Cross Clinic.

The slate-like rocks slid under my boots as I mounted the steep rise by the Orthodox church.

The school was out for recess and the children hung over the rocky wall calling '*Cali mera.*' Goranzi is one of the Greek minority villages. Attracted by the noise in the playground, the two teachers came out to greet us.

I went slipping and sliding across the stony playground which everyone else regards as normal solid earth, wondering how the two large plane trees that shadow it find their sustenance. Like them the school has grown out of the stones. By the time I'd reached the door the four classes were in their places standing stiffly at attention in a fashion rather ruined by their obvious bursting curiosity.

A small grey rabbit came to examine me with twitching nose, then decided that his hutch was safer, and retreated, watching me with one eye round the corner.

Goranzi is proud of its school where its seventy-one children can freely learn Greek, their mother tongue, which was forbidden in the past.

The girls and boys of the Fourth Class sang 'Let's Go To The Vineyard'. Then came a lament of the last war, composed by a villager, which tells of three young men who were killed fighting against the Nazis. Then the 'Youth Song', whose vitality asserts life against death.

When I came out, the kindergarten next door was waiting

for me, munching large slabs of brown bread and butter. Antonella Papa, with her name embroidered in Greek letters on her pinny, sat on the wall, smart white rubber boots dangling and a white kerchief round her head. She had a doll that said 'Ma' and was anxious to show it to me.

A message came asking me to visit the home of one of the villagers. I accepted and we mounted the stony road.

An iron gate in a stone wall led us to the two-storeyed house of Etiaqia Kachi, a smiling, middle-aged woman with the typical white peaked kerchief, the velvet jacket, the embroidered apron covering her full skirt.

With gracious dignity she invited us up the wooden stairs into the guest-room that looks over roof-tops and valley.

We took our seats at the table—I openly admiring the hand-woven carpet, the rugs on the wall and the ceiling with its floral motifs. The daughter-in-law handed a bouncing, seven-months-old baby to Etiaqia and disappeared to re-appear with a tray of tiny glasses full of a sweet liqueur.

We drank the familiar toasts. Etiaqia said regretfully: 'I'm sorry my husband is not here to welcome you. He has been in the United States for many years but will soon return to us. He will see his two sons who were tiny children when he went away, one of them is now studying in the University.'

Herself? She laughed. She is a busy woman—a member of the Red Cross Society and of the Women's Organization, in addition to her work in the co-operative. She smiled a little ruefully. 'Women in Dropulli had to learn to be father as well as mother to their families. You can't understand the misery of a family whose man must emigrate.'

Then Christina, bride of a few days, arrived with her young husband, to ask me breathlessly if I knew her uncle in Australia! She is lovely in her bridal attire, blushing under the gauzy embroidered headdress draped over a tiny cap covered with gold coins perched on her two black plaits.

Long full lace sleeves emerge from a sleeveless hip-length

crimson velvet jacket girdled with an intricately-wrought gilded belt. String after string of gilded coins cover her breast. Over her full white skirt she wears an elaborately-embroidered silk apron.

Her husband is smartly modern in his new suit. He is a tailor from Tepelena and obviously very proud of his lovely bride.

She takes my hand, presses it to her forehead and kisses it.

Such a pity I came so late. A few days earlier and they would have invited me to the wedding. They danced all night on the square in front of the school house.

'The wedding dances are beautiful,' the Director broke in. 'Some of the marriage customs are very old and their significance has been lost. The ceremony begins with the man who has introduced the bridegroom (he is an older member of his family) going with his friend to the bride's house asking : "Give me a spark of fire to light a cigarette but I must have it in a cup of water." The bride's friends give him a special cup of water with a leaf floating in it on which they place a live coal!'

I went at last, Etiaqia kissing me on both cheeks and bidding me come back when her husband has returned. Christina and her young husband walked with me to the car. The school and the kindergarten were released to hang perilously over the stony wall and call good-bye.

The bride touched my hand to brow and lips again. I wished them good fortune and happiness.

'We have it,' the young husband said holding my hand in a firm grip.

The car crunched down the hill.

The Director translated for me a love song the emigrants used to sing when they were in far countries :

Take these two rose-buds  
Take them to her.  
If she is at table  
Let her drink wine to me!  
If she is ill

Let her breathe the perfume!  
If she is dead,  
Place them on her grave!

Looking back to the hillside where Christina's crimson  
jacket glows in the sunlight, I was glad her husband will never  
need to sing it.

## XXV

THE AFTERNOON sun filled the valley with an unearthly golden light as we set out on our two-hour run to Berat. Gradually the valley of Dropulli narrowed. Reluctant to leave it we stopped for a coffee which we did not need, at a tiny cobalt-painted café, built out over a rushing spring.

I was returning to the car when the tourist bus from Tirana drew up with a long-drawn tooting that sent the echoes rolling. The Russian *regissore* of the Opera rushed out to greet me. Here in this wild valley he gallantly kissed my hand and presented me to his travelling companions: Russian women teachers from the school for foreign children in Tirana. One of them spoke excellent English and the Albanians stood by enjoying what they recognized as the familiar eulogies on this lovely spot.

The *regissore* took our photos, we waved good-bye till the next curve hid them from sight.

At Tepelena the walls of Ali Pasha's fortress-palace—all that is left of it—still dominate the meeting place of the Drin and the Viosa. The luxury and wild extravagance of this palace-fort came into my mind as Byron described it:

'Amidst no common pomp the despot sate  
While busy preparations shook the court,  
Slaves, eunuchs, soldiers, guests, and santons wait;

Within, a palace and without, a fort:

. . . . .  
The Turk, the Greek, the Albanian, and the Moor,  
Here mingled in their many-hued array  
While the deep war-drum's sound announced the close of day.'

I wondered what Byron would think of the two girls who came running to the car to talk and laugh with me—university students doing their month's manual labour! Far from their great-great-grandmothers of whom he wrote :

'Here women's voice is never heard  
Tamed to her cage she never wished to roam.'

And I thought—as I have often thought—what extraordinary errors romantic men make about women!

Too far for us to visit are the ruins of the Illyrian city of Antigoneas, so we plunged into the gorges of Kelcyra where the Viosa runs through a narrow V-shaped cleft. Here for longer than history records invader and defender clashed in bloody combat. Three hundred years before our era Roman legions marched this way and Macedonian armies met them in this gorge. A thousand years later Byzantine and Turkish armies fought to hold the strategic route.

A monument on a lonely hillside to Asim Zeneli, commander of a partisan battalion reminded us that here in 1940-41, Greeks joined the Albanians to repel the Italian Fascist armies.

The purple light deepened in the gorge though the sun shone on its craggy summits where two eagles wheeled. Here nature and history were oppressive and we came out into the little town of Kelcyra with a sense of relief and wonderment at the remains of an ancient citadel perched fantastically on a rocky crag like something out of Grimm's fairy tales. Only a few years ago a feudal family dwelt there, owning all the rich land of the valley; during the war it became a meeting-place of the traitors, and the people of the district rose from their centuries of oppression and burned it.



Over a café turq we discussed the possibility of getting to the remains of an Illyrian city that has been discovered in the village of Maleshove but according to the café keeper, backed by several peasants, the road is '*shum kege*' unsuitable for a '*machina*' and none of us were of the true archaeological mould that considers six hours on foot a mere bagetelle. So off we went to Berat at what speed the road would allow—it was constructed for military purposes during the First World War—Spiro uttering foreboding hopes that we would meet no trouble since this road is not popular with motorists. True enough, we met no other car between Kelcyra and Berat.

Soon we rode a razor-backed ridge with valleys falling away on either side, to rise again to barren snow-covered summits glittering in the afternoon sun.

Westward the towering mountains of Laberia lay between us and the sea, an unending contrast of bare mountain and green valley where placid sheep grazed.

War has swept over this region many times. A Greek sculptor who fought there in 1940-41 told me later: 'I have never seen such beauty as in those Albanian mountains nor such poverty, and I was accustomed enough to the poverty of a Greek village.'

We passed solitary road-workers mending patches on the road, a shepherd boy reading a book as he guarded his flock, a group of women working in the fields, the white of their veils, the blue and red of their citjanes vivid against the brown earth.

On a lonely stretch of road with nothing in sight but a circle of hills plunging to deep valleys, we came on a little white-washed school with the children in the playground.

The village school of Gllave! I never discovered what there was to the village except a tiny store half a mile away.

On an impulse I asked Spiro to stop. The school children crowded the fence, bursting with excitement at the appearance of so rare a thing as a car. One of them ran for the teacher.

Clearly flustered, a young man appeared. Introductions.

After the first shock he warmed to us saying, 'This is Gllave's first school. I am a village boy myself. Only a few years ago most of the scattered peasant households were illiterate. No one ever came to Gllave but soldiers and tax-collectors. It took a while to convince the parents that there was anything to be gained from sending their children to school—particularly daughters! Now all those eligible in the district are enrolled.'

He glanced proudly at the bright expectant faces—twenty of them, ranging from seven to fourteen.

Scenting a story I asked: 'Do you have any trouble now with parents?'

'No-o,' the teacher faltered. 'You see, *if* parents don't enrol their children, the children come themselves and ask to be enrolled.'

Everyone smiled. I wished Byron was there.

Girls and boys fell into line promptly under the command of an eleven-year-old girl. They marched in with the precision of the Grenadier Guards. They stood correctly at attention in the schoolroom hung with maps and charts common to the whole world. They greeted us with loud ringing voices, sat with every backbone unnaturally stiff.

I asked for a song. Ten boys came out. Here singing is apparently traditionally male. Earnest discussion. Disagreement. At last they formed a circle, arms round one another's shoulders, heads bowed like a football scrum, one standing aside. He began a high wild chant, the chorus took up the refrain. Chanter—chorus—chanter—chorus, it went on without variation rising from melancholy to passion and passion to triumph.

'An ancient song of Laberia telling how the mountaineers repulsed the Turks,' the teacher explained, stopping it after the twenty-fifth or so verse.

I thanked them and promised to send them some Australian pictures. I like to think of them on Gllave's walls.

A small girl lifted her face to be kissed, bright blue eyes shining, and in them I read a whole new world.

We said good-bye. Small rough hands grasped mine as the class abandoned its excessive formality.

They hung over the fence as we got into the car. '*Mire u pafshim. Rrujen e mbare!*'

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## XXVI

I CAME twice to Berat, once from the coast, once over the mountains from Gllave. Each time the last sun painted the snow-covered mountain of Tomorr in gold and rose that deepened to amethyst and purple on the lower slopes.

Rising almost sheer from the plain of Myzeqe, the vast saddleback of Tomorr towers majestically over the plain to the west and the valleys to the east, giving the impression of being much higher than its 8,000 feet. Not strange that it should have occupied a special place in Albanian folklore. The Professeur told me that men swore (and still swear) sacred oaths by 'Baba Tomorr', as it is known.

I sometimes heard the spirit of Tomorr referred to as the 'Dodona', the same name as the famous oracle of Tamaros in Greece but I could find no connexion.

Six thousand feet up a Bektashi Teque stands on the site of an ancient oracle and each year, on 22 August, a feast is held that clearly retains vestiges of the cult to the Gods of the Mountain.

The partisans used it as an inaccessible base. It is a mountaineer's delight, a skier's paradise.

Old Berat (the Antipatrea of antiquity) hangs like a wasp's nest in the narrow gorge of the river Osum, and New Berat stretches east and west along the widening stream.

To my irritation, protocol demanded that I should take our dinner in the hotel's private dining-room with all curtains

drawn. It had at least the compensation that I met Shbrina Ciu—assistant Minister of Education. A charming woman as well as a competent one and we talked for a long time of the particular educational problems of a rugged country with many scattered farms in lonely places.

'We cannot make schooling compulsory for such children, but each year the parents grow more anxious that their children should be educated and are prepared to make sacrifices to let them come to some school-centre—girls as well as boys.\* The children themselves demand it. I wish I could take you with me to some of these almost inaccessible village schools.'

Both of us agreed that the real heroes are the teachers who bring enlightenment where recently there was only ignorance and superstition.

\* \* \*

For a long time I could hear a bagpipe skirling. 'A *Gajda*', Spiro explained. Up till now he had known all the songs we heard but when I ask about the plaintive melody he tells me it is a song sung only by gipsies who like to keep their songs to themselves.

Night came down. Festoons of lights hung on the steep hill-sides, Tomorr was a solid rampart against the star-encrusted sky, and the Osum played an incessant obligato of murmuring water.

I slept well, but was dragged brutally from sleep at six a.m. by a loudspeaker diffusing news and music under my window. I burrowed into the pillow but it was useless, so I found myself exploring Berat's streets earlier than usual.

Here architecture has had to adjust itself to steep slopes and limited space so that the narrow lanes wind and burrow among two- and three-storeyed houses with projecting upper floors, all piled one above the other: a mediaeval picture of peculiar

\* Report of the Women's Organization in 1964: 'In higher education, 16.7 per cent are girls and in secondary education 33.4 per cent are women. Combined, there are 150 directors and vice-directors of schools.'

charm since Berat also liked wide windows and open balconies where good housewives had hung gaily-covered carpets over the railings.

Above the market-place the arched gateway to what was once the palace of a Turkish pasha still stands in solitary grandeur.

The streets were busy—bus-loads of workers going to the oil-fields; girls hurrying to factories; housewives already out shopping; peasants with laden donkeys coming into the market; children skipping to school; a Bektashi hoxha ambling to the eighteenth-century Mosque; an Orthodox priest making his way to the market.

An old man putting hand on heart stopped to talk to me in rusty English of the America to which he had gone as a boy and from which he had returned in 1919.

In the market, clothes were as varied as foods: cheleshes from the high 'buckets' of Tirana to the 'acorns' of Laberia with many black 'fez' in between. Rubber opingas for sale—made from old motor-tyres!

I talked with a family down from a mountain village. The father and mother were in the typical peasant clothes, the daughter in a modern coat and skirt. She is a student at the Agricultural College at Lushnje. They carried a large home-woven carpet priced at 9,000 leks, spun, dyed, and woven at home from the wool of their own sheep. 'How long to make it? Six months? A year?' They shrugged. 'It's a spare-time job.'

A sixteen-year-old gipsy girl attached herself to me—Shkendi who worked in the hospital kitchen. Beautiful, Indian in type, with classic features and heavy-lidded eyes.

A woman in scarlet citjane with a handsome striped apron, stopped, eyeing me, a foreigner, in amazement. Then spontaneously she threw her arms round me and kissed me. Mirushe from a mountain village. Please will I come and see them? It is only three hours on foot and I can go two-thirds of the way

at least on a donkey! 'One day,' I promised. She wrote down her address.

In front of a bookshop window we met young Muharrem, son of one of the waiters at the hotel. He had strong views on books and told us his preferences. Next year he would go to High School. Please had I any exciting Australian books like *Robinson Crusoe*?

While we waited for the car to undergo minor attention at the garage we wandered along the river bank to New Berat with its new houses, schools, nursery and hospital.

There a group of young girls working in the garden came running to talk to the stranger. They were all nurses or assistant-doctors—the latter course is mid-way between a nurse's and a doctor's training. Questions tumbled over questions.

I wrote my name in their notebooks. They wished me good health, but if I was ever ill to come back to them and they would look after me as if I was their own mother. The youngest, Ajerdita, with skin like a ripe peach and ear-rings that were never still, laughed like a tinkling bell.

By a white stone building on the river's edge a train of toddlers each holding the tail of the other's pink pinny, wound in a wavering crocodile over the green lawn. The leader caught sight of us, looked round, fell over and the whole train fell over in turn like ninepins.

\* \* \*

With Spiro and the car refreshed we sped up the one possible approach to the citadel, for elsewhere the cliffs fall almost sheer from the rocky plateau to the city dwarfed to a toy where minarets rise from the foreshortened cluster of houses.

From the top a superb panorama—from Tomorr's snows, along the green valley, across the adjoining oil-fields and the Muzeque plains to the smoke-blue sea.

We exchanged greetings with four other sightseers, three

Czech engineers and an Albanian, and we went together to gaze on the large oblong blocks that mark the citadel's Illyrian foundations. Here the many additions and restorations that have withstood war and weather can be easily traced. It has known all the ravages of history since the Illyrians laid its first stones in the fourth century B.C.

No mere fortress this, but a walled city which could hold several thousand people and resist indefinitely. When it was captured by the Turks Skanderbeg tried in vain for seven years to retake it. To-day one hundred and fifty families still live within the walls, the settlement itself repeating the city pattern of winding rocky streets and two- and three-storeyed houses so close that their overhanging balconies almost touch.

We visited it on the Day of Spring and over every doorway hung a bunch of flowers or the branch of a leafy tree.

As usual, we were soon surrounded by children and two small girls, Mimosa and Malentina appointed themselves my escort, one carrying my handbag, the other my glove every time I took it off to make some notes: pupils of the Elementary School in the citadel—later they will go 'down below' to the Secondary School.

The citadel is a world in itself. Old women still living were born and married there, have never gone to the City and will go only when their coffins are borne to the cemetery.

If ever a community had its spiritual welfare over-provided for, it was here. There were churches at every turn, most of them unused and dilapidated from long neglect. However, anything worth preserving is being preserved to-day and skilful restorations made.

Under the guidance of the guardian, we wandered from church to church, each one with something of interest. The murals in the Church of Saint Marie Vlaherne dating from the sixteenth century showing biblical characters dressed in national costume. The congregation had just left the Cathedral—a large stone building dating from the eighteenth century,



heavy with the perfume of incense. The smallest, perched dizzily on the edge of a cliff, with a blossoming tree rustling against its ancient bricks.

When we went at last, Mimosa and Malentina accompanied us to the high-arched doorway. Gravely they kissed me, handed me bag and gloves and a sprig of leafing shrub so that spring and its blessing went with me.

## XXVII

WHEN I came first to Oil Town, Baba Tomorr's snows were fiery in the last sun.

Innumerable large oil-trucks passed us as we turned off the main road and sped through a tunnel of tall trees towards innumerable oil-derricks rising from a pastoral landscape.

On a gentle slope beyond it, the oblique rays gilded the windows of the pink and white houses of Qytetit Stalin (the Kucove of pre-war maps) the oldest oil-field in the country started in 1927 by an Italian company to which Zog had given exclusive rights.

At the hostel on the top of the hill, originally the Italian manager's house, a young man waited for us. I was staggered when he introduced himself as the Chief Engineer.

A pleasant room overlooking the field—a good dinner. An interesting evening with the engineer, whose history is one of those simple stories one finds everywhere in this new-old country. Poverty forced his father to emigrate in 1939; in the United States he earned a precarious living as a dishwasher, etc., returning only recently to find his son completing his studies in Moscow, where he had married a Russian fellow-student.

Next morning we visited the oil-field where a wheat crop was pushing between exhausted wells and hay-stacks stood incongruously beside derricks.

'In the old days, the oil benefited us little,' the engineer said. 'It was sent to Italy to be refined and brought back and

sold here at very high prices. All the skilled workers—from engineers to pumpers—were Italian. Albanians did the unskilled work and it was Italian policy to teach them nothing. The Italians lived in comfortable houses, the Albanians in huts.

‘At that time there was only one Albanian oil-engineer in the country. To-day he is our Chief Mechanic and I always consult him because he knows so much.’

We passed the twisted remains of machinery above a big gusher that had caught fire. It was mastered only when Soviet specialists in the extinction of oil-fires were flown from Soviet oilfields. I saw a fine documentary film of the incident.

I watched the slow rhythmic working of a drill that was already down 4,000 feet and would go much deeper.

In a neat white house on the hillside a retired worker and his wife told me their story over coffee and a lemon liqueur :

‘We came here in 1935, because there was no work in our own town. For a month we practically starved, then I was put on as an unskilled labourer. I worked twelve, thirteen, sometimes fourteen hours for three leks a day with which we had to keep a family. She’ll tell you what we ate.’

His wife pressed her work-worn hands together and spoke softly : ‘We had four children and we lived on leeks and corn-bread. Even the bread was bad because we could buy only sour corn. The Italians laughed at us and called us “donkeys” because we ate only corn and leeks.’

Her husband broke in : ‘I said one day “Give us more money and we’ll show you what we’ll eat.” The Italian doctor laughed : “It wouldn’t be any use to you. You don’t understand money. You wouldn’t know how to spend it.”

‘They drove us worse than donkeys. On 11 February 1936 we had a general strike. Think of it, ex-peasants, poverty-stricken workers struck for better conditions ! But the Italians called in the Minister of the Interior and he set Zogu’s police on us and they beat us as no man would beat a mule.

'Most of the installations were destroyed by the Nazis or by Allied bombers during the Liberation. Then we were bang up against another problem. We didn't know how to run the field and the Italians worked badly. So we said: "Every one of you who teaches an Albanian how to do your job, can go home." By 1946 the whole lot of them had gone!'

His wife informed me that 900 women worked on the field. 'They work as well as the men and they stay women at the same time,' she said. 'Three Soviet women engineers and a doctor have married Albanian men.' Then, hesitantly: 'We are having a party for Women's Day this afternoon and they asked me to invite you.'

\* \* \*

Before going to the party I dropped in to the home of an Albanian engineer and his Soviet wife. Interesting that these modern little houses with all conveniences are occupied alternately by an engineer and an oil-worker.

The home was a pleasant mixture—Korca rugs on the floor, Russian china on the table, Chinese brocade covering the chairs. Pretty young wife—also an oil-engineer—in well-cut fawn skirt and jumper. Albanian grandmother in traditional black and white, who added to the usual social greetings on our entrance the traditional second round of handshakes when we were seated.

Two-year-old Aloysha soon shattered any formality by taking it for granted that I'd been brought to entertain him as his brother-playmate was away, so I heard details of life among the oilfield staff while carrying on a side game of Peep-bo.

The wife brought in liqueur and llokum. Toasts were drunk in Albanian, Russian and English. They told me that that year they were going to spend their annual leave with her mother in Moscow.

Aloysha sneaked several pieces of llokum and when detected ran with much giggling to hide in his mother's skirt.

A friendly house—a happy home.

\* \* \*

I went off to the Women's party in the dance-hall of the Culture House. A woman's party it was indeed (the older women don't like it if men come)—among the crowd of old women, young women, girls and babies, the only males were the orchestra (who apparently didn't count) and my guides. If I had had any serious competitors in the Most-kissed-women-in-Albania Championship they would have been eliminated in the first five minutes.

In the midst of frocks and sweaters and skirts of all types and lengths I was suddenly acutely aware of my slacks and sweater. But, after one horrified glance, the whole crowd, except one curious three-year-old boy, pretended it hadn't noticed. Someone made a speech of welcome. I began one in reply in the midst of which a baby bawled loudly, to the intense embarrassment of mother, grandmother and all other female relatives and the visible reproof of everyone else.

Then the orchestra struck up a syncopated version of 'Lulet Bora' and for the next half hour (slacks, boots and all) I strove to keep up with a series of vigorous, skirted-partners while the three-year-old squealed loudly every time I passed to draw attention to my intruding trousers.

An old woman in traditional black, her wrinkled face swathed in a white veil, made a shy speech before I left. She apologized because she was not very good at speech-making, folding and unfolding her veined, distorted hands as she spoke. 'When you go home', she said, in a shaky voice, 'tell them out there about the lovely party you had with us. Tell them how us women are free to come out like this without our veils. Tell them we don't want war any more. We've had too much war. Tell them that in Albania Yesterday and To-day are like night and day.'

## XXVIII

EVERYWHERE I went in Albania I was astonished at the high cultural level. Everywhere I met not only musicians and singers and dancers, writers and poets, but sculptors and painters. By happy accident I tracked down their 'nest' in Tirana.

It began during a performance of *The Barber of Seville* at the Opera House.

Here let me digress. Tirana—with a population of about 150,000—maintains a permanent ballet and opera with an ambitious repertoire: including *La Traviata*, *Eugene Onegin*, *Don Pasquale*, *The Bartered Bride*, *Jolande* and three Albanian operas written in recent years. These combine actual stories with local folk-music, dancing and costumes and have a tremendous and well-deserved local success.

Albania could provide the world with basses of the highest standard. On this particular evening Mentor Xhemali was playing Don Basilio—a performance I've not seen excelled anywhere though there are Albanians who say Luka is as good.

Xhemali has a history that in itself would provide a libretto for an opera. 'A gipsy, before the war he worked (when there was work) on the docks at Vlora. When the invasion came he joined the partisans. There the quality of his voice was realized. When peace came, he was sent to Moscow to be trained. A rich and stirring voice, a good sense of drama. In all a fine artist and a man unspoiled by success.

But to return to my story, early in Act I I discovered a small girl in the corner of my loge. I invited her to come up beside me so that she could see better. She shook her head. I pressed her. Reluctantly she came. A few minutes later an usher blew in and my small friend was swept out. I said I would pay for her. The payment was refused but the smiling usher returned her. Ecstatic, she took her place beside me. If there was anyone who took into her very soul every note of Rossini's music it was eleven-year-old Natasha.

At the interval her friend Vittoria, up till now in the stalls, joined us.

I unravelled the mystery. They were both music students of the Academy of Arts. A certain number are given tickets for every musical performance, but other hopefuls always wait anxiously till it begins and then are given any empty seats. Vittoria had been lucky. Natasha, alas, not! She 'snuk' in, decided I had a 'sympathetic face', and tucked herself away in my loge.

Thus began one of my sweetest Albanian friendships, in no way diminished by the slightness of my '*Shqip*' or their lack of any other language. They came home that night with me in my car and every first Sunday of the month, all in their Sunday best, they presented themselves solemnly at my hotel, looked at my pictures, examined my books, sipped lemonade. At first they refused the cakes I ordered lest it should be thought they came for that and it took much persuasion and my refusal to eat unless they did so, to persuade them.

But back to the 'nest' of Albania's cultural life. One morning they proudly escorted me to the Academy of Arts, which consists of a number of large new buildings scattered over a playground shaded with eucalyptus trees. Here talented children from all over the country can enrol from the age of seven and remain for eleven years, since special hostels are provided for their accommodation, and they are provided also with a general education. When the Academy was opened at

the end of 1946 it had twenty pupils. Now it is on its way to the thousand.

The ambitious curriculum includes: music, sculpture, painting and ceramics, dramatic art and a Cultural School which trains directors for Houses of Culture. There is, of course, special emphasis on national folk-music and folklore generally.

At the end of the course the most highly talented are given further opportunity by being sent to special academies in other countries. Other graduates are appointed to suitable jobs in Albania, which has an ever-growing demand for them.

A Czech woman teacher invited us to hear her pupils play. A dark young man took up his violin with the intensity of Oistrach and played Bach beautifully. He was succeeded by a fifteen-year-old boy, pink-cheeked, a *mêche* of blonde hair tumbling over his eyes. Nervously he began a difficult unaccompanied Bach study, his teacher clasping and unclasping her hands. Frowning, he finished and looked away to snowy summits framed in eucalyptus trees as though to forget us. Corelli; Bach again. We were forgotten. He has remarkable talent. Some day I'm sure the world will hear of Eno Tasko.

In the piano section a small fat girl in the elementary school played a familiar serenade counting under her breath, while her teacher almost coo-ed to her. Then Milena Shkurti played a Chopin polonaise with understanding and extraordinary power for a thirteen-year-old, and her teacher alternately rejoiced and suffered. Milena's is another name we shall hear.

I visited all the other studios. A fascinating morning.

\* \* \*

At the Academy I learned that the School for Classical Ballet and Folk dancing is linked with the Opera School. Though invited to visit it by the Armenian director I never found time.

When I arrived at the Opera House one night to see a production of the ballet *Lola* I found myself, as usual, in a



box. Now a box is the worst place from which to see a ballet, so I revolted! The gallery or nothing! Amidst protests and wails from the usher that so many leks had been squandered, I went upstairs and found myself in the midst of students from the School of Ballet. The only outsiders were a young soldier and his girl, and our party.

The gallery audience itself was a show—lively girls and boys from ten to sixteen, most of them simple and unaffected; some of them putting on the airs that Plisetskaja and Helpmann never assume.

They told me they came from all over the country, their talents originally discovered in local Pioneer Palaces and Culture Houses, the State charging itself with their training where necessary. The heroine in to-night's ballet was 'discovered' in the dancing-class at Tirana's Pioneer Palace. From there she went—along with the hero and another ballerina—to the Bolshoi Ballet School to be trained.

The conductor entered. Deep silence fell upon the high-spirited laughing boys and girls. Enraptured they listened to the overture.

The young soldier held his girl's hand.

When the curtain rose upon a Spanish village at the time of the Napoleon invasion, a long sigh rose from them all: the sigh of the dedicated.

*Lola* is one of those part-classical, part-folkloristic ballets that Soviet choreographers compose so well, since they give scope not only for those who have reached the pinnacle of the classical tradition but for those who are studying the folk-dances of innumerable countries, and young students who learn their stage-craft with a first run-on.

It was produced with artistry, danced with fire and skill that would be applauded on any stage in the world.

Albanian choreographers are preparing a ballet on local themes. One asked me if I could obtain for him the score of an Australian ballet!

Already they have an ambitious repertoire of which I saw the charming French ballet *La Fille Mal-Gardée* and *Zhurale*, with two enchanting ballerinas and a young male dancer who have technique and temperament to reach the heights.

\* \* \*

In the 'old days' Tirana had no theatres. It is making up for it now. Theatre-going has become a national addiction. There is always a queue outside Tirana's four theatres. Young men, old men, old women, young women. No blasé audience this, but one that takes the production on the stage as though it was indeed a projection of its own life. One evening at the Theatre Popullar a man told me he had seen Kole Jakova's *Our Soil*, five times! 'It's us, up there,' he said waving at the stage. 'Us as we were,' for this is a story of the partisans in the mountains during the last war. Even for me, when the curtain rose on a meeting of peasants in typical dress, outside a typical kulla, it had the impact of reality. For the rest of the audience—predominantly male—it was something lived. Here was the old patriarchal life (though here the patriarch was the eldest son) with the oppressed women who yet played an important emotional role. Here was the old stoicism.

But it's not only local drama they enjoy. I saw first-rate productions of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, Schiller's *Love and Intrigue* and Molière's *School for Wives*: Goldoni, and Ostrovsky were also in the repertoire.\*

\* \* \*

Judged by the crowds outside hoping to secure a last-minute seat, I think perhaps the most popular performances of all are those of the National Folklore Ensemble.

When one considers that ten Albanias could fit into England, or any large Australian cattle-station, the variety in musical

\* By 1964, 100 plays on local themes had been presented in Albanian theatres.

form and interpretation is literally amazing. Songs and costumes from all over the country: from Shkoder, Kukes, Dardhe, Dropulli, Peshkopi, Theth, Laberia, and so on and on and on.

Perhaps because the Albanian is closer to the ritual origin of his dance-forms they have a significance lost to most European countries. These were not designed to charm the tourist-eye but to express something profoundly rooted in their lives. It is not difficult to believe that long before there was a Europe at all some of these dances were danced at pagan altars on mountain tops.

Fascinating to see in the audience women from the villages wearing the same dress as their sisters wear as 'folk costume' on the stage.

Even the popular songs sung by a very pretty and popular Tiranan girl have more than usual significance. She wears the ancient festal dress of Tiranans that is still worn by many brides: a citjane of the finest white gauzy material—it takes sixteen yards to make it!—which is drawn into billowing bloomers by silver anklets; over it an exquisitely embroidered silver bolero, a tiny silver cap on her curls. The singer's career is typical—daughter of a poor peasant, during the war she carried messages to the partisans, walking beside a little loaded donkey as a blind. To-day she is married and has a child and is Tirana's most popular artist.

At the interval two young peasants from an agricultural co-operative came to talk to us. They were in Tirana for a conference, but didn't intend to miss any of the entertainment. 'Come to our village,' they begged me, writing down names and addresses, 'we can show you dances and songs as good as these. . . .'

I saw also an amusing variety programme with a modern young man as compère, who began by reciting a poem criticizing women who don't work and men who get drunk. Various satirical skits—one about a peasant and his wife who

endeavour to read the newspaper, and give it up because it's full of foreign words and phrases. A cutting sketch on bureaucracy (international butt!), one of the most entertaining of its kind I have seen—with songs and dances—and plenty of good humour, judging by the reactions of the audience.

\* \* \*

Book Month : everywhere large posters. All my writer friends rushing round giving lectures at this factory and that school; going off to this co-operative or that village. The bookshops crowded, publishers in a ferment because the demand exceeds the output, large as it is.

My friend the novelist, Dmitri Shuteriqi, told me that when he published his first novel in 1935 he had to pay the printer and see to the sale of books himself since there was not a single publishing house in the country!

With its population of a million and a half an Albanian writer can't live from his books alone, but if he or she shows talent and is admitted to the Union of Writers and Artists the conditions of work would turn a Western writer speechless with envy. Whatever his job, in general, he works only half-time for full pay so that he can devote extra time to his writing!

If writer, composer, painter or sculptor, conceives an idea that is going to take a long time to complete, then he can apply for a 'Creative Vacation' which can be from two months to two years.

\* \* \*

The Professeur's daughter is studying medicine, which gave me the chance to visit one of the youngest universities in Europe. Tiranans love to tell you how in 1935—in spite of 90 per cent illiteracy—the Minister of Finance complained of an 'over-production of intellectuals'!

In 1945, students went to Moscow to study, in order to provide Albania with teachers.

Higher education had to wait because there were no

qualified teachers. Only six years after the war was it possible to open a polytechnic and agricultural College. Greatly daring, in 1952 and 1953, a medical school, and law and economics institutes were opened. The action was premature. They had to ask the Soviet Union for help. Specialists came and they lectured and trained the Albanians. Four years later the university was opened.

To-day there are more than 5,000 students, 20 per cent girls and the percentage rising.

\* \* \*

April 6! A cloudy day and Mount Dajti and Kruja were almost hidden under heavy lowering clouds. The Poet and I looked over the city from a hill above the University. On the steps of the Church of Santo Procope a bearded priest in long black robe and tall black hat read his prayer book. It was the twentieth anniversary of the Italian invasion of Albania, the Poet told me.

'I was seventeen then, a pupil of the gymnase at Shkoder. When we heard the news, four of us came post-haste to Tirana, thinking surely we must fight! Surely we must protest! But protestation hadn't yet started. We went back to Shkoder. My three friends died in the partisan war that followed.' He recites to me a poem he had written to them the night before.

'How strange it is! It was a hard and frightening life, then, but I have a nostalgia for it, and to-day I'm lonely for those companions whom I lost.'

He was solemn and Spiro's gaiety was quenched as we entered the little Cemetery of the Partisans, and I, too, felt my heart contract, as we walked towards the simple white monument that rises above the equally simple graves.

He placed his hand on a headstone. 'He was my friend. We played together as little boys, we sat together in school, we fought side by side. He was only twenty-one when he was killed.'

Tirana old and new stretched before us, the fragile pencils of its innumerable minarets seeming to float in the bright air. Below, a sudden shaft of sunshine poured through the clouds, lighting up University Square with its streams of gaily-dressed students.

We were silent and I plucked a sprig of rosemary, my heart hot with the same anger that always shakes me in every country at these monuments to so many young people destroyed in so many wars that should never have happened.

## XXIX

THE DAY I spent at Apollonia had not only the excitement any amateur archaeologist must experience on such an occasion but the added one of seeing in process the work of re-discovering a city which Cicero described as '*magna urbs et gravis*'.

'Apollonia is our most promising archaeological site,' Professor Animali had told me in Tirana. 'We began large-scale excavation work there in 1958, assisted by the Academy of Sciences of the U.S.S.R. which assigned ten archaeologists and restorers led by a remarkable woman, Professor Blavatsky, and also sent the necessary equipment. Last summer excavations were carried out simultaneously in eight places.'

Not that there was much romance about the beginning of our 'expedition'. Though warned early in the piece by the men making the new road, we bounced over what was left of the old and stuck fast in the gluey mud where oxen-drawn farm carts had worn deep ruts.

'That's Apollonia,' a tractor-driver said, pointing to a green hill rising gently from the plain where other tractors were drawing heavy ploughs over the dark soil that had only recently been drained.

It looked so deceptively close that when the car bogged, we decided to walk on while Spiro, whom nothing can depress, went back half a mile to ask the road-workers to help get the car out of the mud.

It took us the best part of an hour to pick our way to the

village of Pojane (so Time and lazy tongues have deformed the name) where a dozen heavily-laden ox-carts were turning into the yard of the Agricultural Co-operative. An old woman came running from her new brick house on hearing that I was Australian and kissed me on both cheeks, rattling away in rapid Albanian to which I replied with all the polite phrases I had learnt.

On the last steep pull a peasant passed us leading a cow, between whose horns swung a white cross to preserve it from evil.

We were half-way up the hill when Spiro swept past in his Roman charioteer fashion, very muddy but bestowing a wide grin on us as he passed.

Above us, a Byzantine church and monastery of the fourteenth century dreamed in the shadow of cypresses so old that they looked black.

On the grassy plateau I stood in the shadow of an enormous spreading oak looking away to where luminous sea-mists marked the Adriatic coast, thinking with something like awe of the millenia of civilization this tranquil hillside had known. What had happened in those years, I was asking myself, here where to-day there was no sound but the sweet, intermittent tinkling of sheep-bells?

Then Apollonia came alive. Pilo came, greeting me in good English and touching hand to heart and head.

Pilo might be called the soul of Apollonia, so long has he been there, so deeply does he love every ancient stone, so passionately does he anticipate what will be found when systematic and continuous excavations bring to light more of the city. He is an old man, with a tanned face deeply scored with wrinkles and deep-set eyes that burn under shaggy brows, shadowed by the casque of a purple velvet cap. There is a fine dignity about his tall spare frame and his straight shoulders. He learnt his English in the United States, he tells me, whither he emigrated after the First World War seeking for work which



poverty-stricken Pojane could not provide. He stayed seven years and came back as poor as he went.

'I was hungry for my country but what was I to do here? Pojane was poor. There was no work. Then the French archaeologist Leon Rey, who had begun working here in 1923, asked me to stay with him. I stayed. He was a good man. He never stole things from our country like other archaeologists. I wrote to him after the war but he was dead.' He paused, raising his cap as though the dead man's spirit walked among the ruins.

'There, where that field is to-day, ran the wall which enclosed the city. It was about three miles in circumference. Peasants are not allowed to cultivate it with tractors. Here you can see the part of it we unearthed in 1956.'

Brick on stone the wall stands as solid as when it was built 2,300 years ago. As we followed its length Pilo told me the city's long history :

'A colony of Greeks came to settle here in 588 before our era and then the first wall was built of these big stone blocks—some over six feet in length. But already there had been an Illyrian settlement here longer than history knows. In those days a river ran at the foot of the hills.' He motioned with a horny finger where to-day are only fields. 'That was Apollonia's outlet to the sea, and it became one of the most important trading places on the Adriatic. But in addition it was a rich cultural centre. Over there you can see the ruins of a magnificent monument of the third century before our era. Come, I shall show you.'

We stepped across the grey stones, past the weathered, fallen columns, along the promenade where once rich Apollonians took their leisurely walks.

'This is the second gallery. Here are the niches ornamented with sculpture.'

He uses always the present tense, as though the vast loggia still stands in all its glory, and as we walked across the flower-

studded grass the shadowy city rose once again where to-day a gentle wind sighs in the gnarled olive-trees.

'Here is the Acropolis,' his hand outlines it in the empty air above the shrub-covered hillside. 'Next year we may excavate it.'

To me it is difficult to imagine that it will one day emerge from the earth that covers it. Then I remembered that in Rome the Forum was found under forty-five feet of earth.

'In the third century B.C. the Romans came here, but Apollonia kept its Greek culture and language and continued to prosper. In the fourth century A.D. the city's decline began when an earthquake changed the course of the river and cut it off from the sea.' He paused. 'Here in this street on the inner side of the wall we found a heap of ceramics from that period—thousands of slightly-damaged vessels and a great many fragments.'

I picked up one no bigger than my nail—cream and brown—feeling slightly guilty, but Pilo only smiled and I carried it away with me.

We went down a flagged roadway where the carts of two thousand years have cut deep furrows. Behind us a shepherd was herding his flock into a sheepfold and the air was tremulous with the sweet jangle of bells.

Where I could see only protruding broken ruins Pilo stopped. 'Here we unearthed a rich house built early in our era. It has twenty rooms, faced with marble or stucco and built round a courtyard lined with columns.

'In two rooms the floor is of marble, in five of mosaic. See!' he stepped carefully across what looked like a sandpit and scooped the sand aside to reveal an exquisite mosaic of numerous delicate shades—Pilo says twenty!

What sandalled feet, I wonder, once walked across this Nereid riding a dolphin surrounded by fish and frolicking sea-horses?

Dreaming, I went up the hill again and into the high-walled

courtyard where petals drifted from a blossoming almond tree and Spiro sang as he drew water to wash the car from the well where ropes had cut deep grooves into the stone coping.

Once a pagan temple stood here. To-day the rose-coloured dome of the church deepens the blue of the sky. Successive waves of invading armies have swept over it leaving little of value except two old icons darkened by time, and half-obliterated frescoes.

To-day courtyard and monastery are a museum for the objects discovered in the old city. Museum is scarcely the word since it implies organization and documentation but here things come too fast, and in the old refectory is a collection as yet only roughly sorted. Vestiges of all the centuries that life has been lived here. Illyrian names on stones. Greek ceramics. Roman tiles. Two Byzantine lions. Funerary urns with ashes still in them. Amphorae. A woman's head. Stone catapult-balls. A marble hand.

A headless Minerva, curls falling over her shoulders, hand on hip, arched feet showing under the graceful sweep of her marble robe.

A magistrate of the city 2,000 years ago. A winged angel from a Greek grave. A gravestone on which Pilo traces the fine and elegant Greek writing of which all we can clearly decipher is the word 'Good-bye' in Greek.

Two marble feet beside a priestesses' sacrificial pillar, one poised as though for flight.

A headless majestic woman's body they call the Herculanean because one similar was found in Herculaneum.

A votive stone—the only one found here in Roman lettering—given by a woman to some lost god in thanks for curing her sore ears!

Out in the courtyard I blinked in the brilliant light and tried to bring myself back to the present. 'The best things discovered are in Tirana Museum,' Pilo said. 'The signed statuette of Athena; the head of a bearded man very like Demosthenes.'

I shook my head vehemently. I have seen too many bearded men, too many Athenas in too many museums. You can have it all for this Roman gravestone with a wreath and a rabbit on it, and the words 'My son'.

Pilo smiled and raised a hand. 'Wait! I shall show you something I don't usually show visitors.'

Up the hollowed stairs to the old monastery. A length of string unwound from a rusty nail on a rickety door and within on improvised shelves, rough tables, wealth for which the museums of the world would compete! Shelf after shelf of priceless beautiful things each with a pencilled number tied on with string. Vases being mended. Boxes of dirt-filled jars not yet sorted.

Pilo pointed to a large and magnificent Greek vase that still lacks some pieces for its meticulous reconstruction, explaining, 'Professor Blavatsky who comes here in summer hopes she may find the rest this year. She is helping to train our young archaeological students.'

He paused before a double-handled vase. Russet, black and ochre. A girl and a soldier. ('For ever will he love and she be fair!') Fifth or sixth century B.C.

Then he turned and placed in my hands a child's clay ball saying: 'We found it in a little girl's grave.'

Time runs backward; 2,500 years ago a little girl died and, weeping, they placed her favourite ball beside her. My eyes sting and from the window I see the little flying feet go skimming across the grass.

At last I went. And as I went I thought: 'What will Apollonia be without Pilo?' and as though he had read my mind, he said, as he twisted the string around the nail again, 'The Government is training my son as an archaeologist and he will follow me.'

It was the perfect ending.